

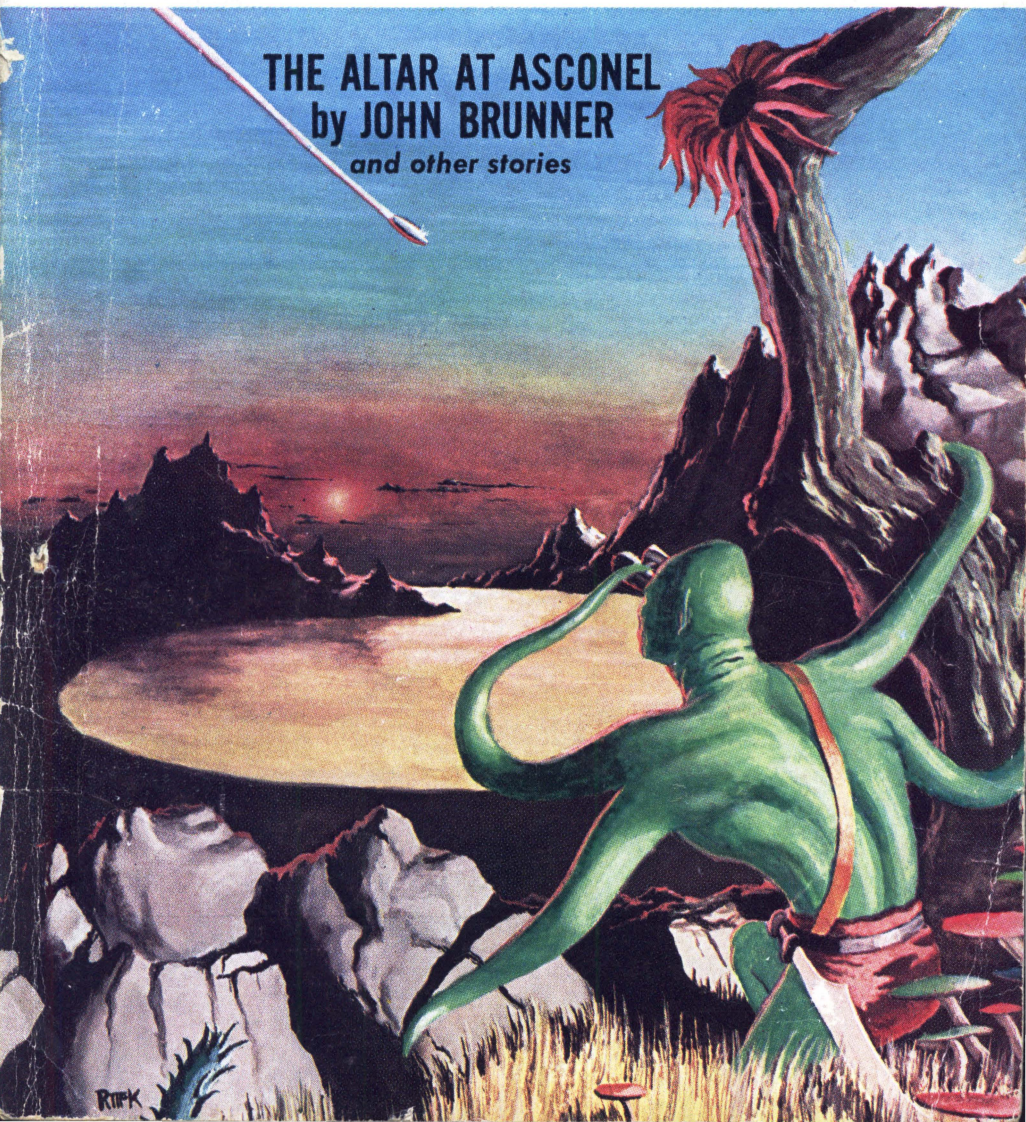
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**WORLDS OF**



# SCIENCE FICTION

APRIL, 1965  
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**ALL NEW  
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## “What You Do Once —”

When we were first hooked on science fiction, quite some time ago, one of our favorite stories was Doc Smith's *Skylark Three*, and one of our favorite scenes occurred when young Dick Seaton, studying under the wise old masters of the planet Norlamin, was working with Rovol of Rays at a tremendous technical project. Side by side they constructed new instrument consoles, their fingers flying:

Rovol's fingers were also flying, but the forces he directed were seizing and shaping materials, as well as other forces. The Norlaminian physicist set up one integral, stepped upon a pedal, and a new red-topped stop precisely like the others, and numbered in order, appeared as though by magic upon the panel. Rovol then leaned back in his seat — but the red-topped stops continued to appear, at the rate of exactly seventy per minute . . . “Never forget that it is a waste of energy to do the same thing twice, and that if you know precisely what is to be done, you need not do it personally at all.”

Well, that was a long time ago.

But we were reminded of it twice this month.

One reason was simply that our next serial, of course, is that same Doc Smith's latest and biggest *Skylark* story, *Skylark DuQuesne*. The other reason was a letter from the sf club at MIT.

Remember last month we were talking about the things fans do? — including the preparation of bibliographical material and indexes? Well, up at MIT they've brought the old reliable Don Day index of sf magazines up to date. (You can get it from the MIT Science Fiction Society, Room 50-020, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Mass., by the way. \$2.) But they haven't merely published it. They've computerized it. All the data is now on punched cards, and the machines at the MIT Computation Center are printing it out in the form of mimeograph stencils. Comes time for a new edition? Why just put in your additional cards — and the machine will print out your revision.

“Never forget that it is a waste of energy to do the same thing twice . . . and that if you know precisely what is to be done, you need not do it personally at all!”—THE EDITOR

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# THE ALTAR

by JOHN BRUNNER

# AT ASCONEL

Illustrated by MORROW

*The civilization of the stars was dissolving like a dream—and its terrible chaos drew Spartak into the violence he had foresworn!*

## I

At last, after almost ten years, the moment had come. He felt himself ready for the task he had undertaken.

Spartak of Asconel closed the

latest of hundreds of books which he had consulted, drew a deep breath and gazed around his cell. Other books were piled high on every shelf. Beside them were tape, crystal and disk recordings, reels of microfilm, manuscripts — the win-

nowings of a decade-long search through the unparalleled store of knowledge here on Annanworld.

The switch from student to teacher was as easy as picking up the microphone of his own recorder and uttering the first words. His hand closed on the microphone as though seizing a noxious plant, that must be gripped firmly to prevent it stinging, and he began to speak in a measured voice.

"The story of the Empire," he commenced, and heard in imagination the crashing of worlds like bowling-balls being hurled down a skittle-alley, "is shrouded in mystery. Ten thousand years have eroded history away.

"We know that we were borrowers. We inherited the abandoned property — most significantly, the interstellar ships — of a people that matured and died in the galactic hub while we were struggling outward from our legendary planet of origin. We know that this chance bequest allowed our race to spread among millions of stars like an epidemic.

"Details beyond this bare outline, however, can never be reclaimed. It is as though one were to blink and find a century had passed. Blink now, and man is creeping along the galactic rim, in those areas which were later to be regarded as the home of mutants and pirates. Blink once more, and the Empire's writ runs all the way to the threshold of the Big Dark."

Now he was warming to his tale, the greatest in the chequered span of human history. His hooded

eyes saw other sights than the plain stone walls of the tiny room. The note of uncertainty was fading from his voice.

He was scarcely aware of the opening of his door, and did not turn to look at the gray-clad novice who had appeared in the entrance.

"Yet," he continued, "something strained past its limit. Something was overburdened, and broke. And the Empire fell."

The novice, impatient perhaps, moved from one foot to the other; the disturbance caught a fragment of Spartak's attention.

He put aside the microphone, and the hum of the recorder died. Shifting his lanky body in its coarse brown robe to face the intruder, he asked a question with his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Brother Spartak," the voice said. "Brother Ulwyn sent me with a message from the gatehouse. There is a man demanding to see you who claims to be your brother."

Spartak repressed an exclamation of astonishment and put his hand to his crisp brown beard. He said, "Ah — well, it's not impossible. I have brothers, though I never expected to see one of them on Annanworld . . . What's his name?"

The novice looked unhappy, and shuffled his sandal-clad feet on the stone flags. He said, "I'm afraid Brother Ulwyn didn't tell me."

"What does he look like? Did you see him?"

"I caught a glimpse of him through the bars of the gate. He's — well, not as tall as you are, and he has red hair. And there's a long scar

down his right cheek, which looks like a sword-cut." The novice added the final detail eagerly.

"That's not very helpful. All three of my brothers have red hair and all are shorter than I am. And last time I saw them none had a sword-scar!"

"He bears no resemblance to you that I could tell," the novice suggested after a pause.

"That's no help either," Spartak grunted. "I call them my brothers, but in fact we're half-brothers, only. Well, it can hardly be Hodat, who rules on Asconel, so it must be either Vix or Tiorin. Send him in!"

"Unfortunately—" The novice swallowed in enormous embarrassment. "Unfortunately Brother Ulwyn cannot admit him. He carries a gun, and will not part with it."

In spite of his oath of allegiance to his non-violent Order, Spartak felt he was beginning to grin. "It sounds like Vix," he said gravely. "Tell me, has he already threatened to burn his way in if the gate isn't opened?"

"I—I imagine so, from Brother Ulwyn's agitation," the novice confirmed, and ventured a shy smile.

"That'll be Vix," Spartak murmured, and got to his feet. "Let's find out what he wants."

## II

They passed through twilit passages, cool for all the baking heat of noon outdoors, and walked the length of the gravel paths between the crisp green lawns, the low trees and beads of carefully tended flowers. Here and there, groups of

gray-clad novices—with among them an occasional off-world student in gaudier clothing—gathered about their brown-robed tutors, discussing knotty points of human history.

Spartak quickened his stride till the novice was scuttling to keep up. After all, the appearance of a brother he hadn't seen in a decade was an event.

At the threshold of the gatehouse Brother Ulwyn came to meet them. That was an event, too; the gatekeeper was stout, elderly and usually imperturbable. Now his round face was sweat-shiny and his voice wheezed with agitation.

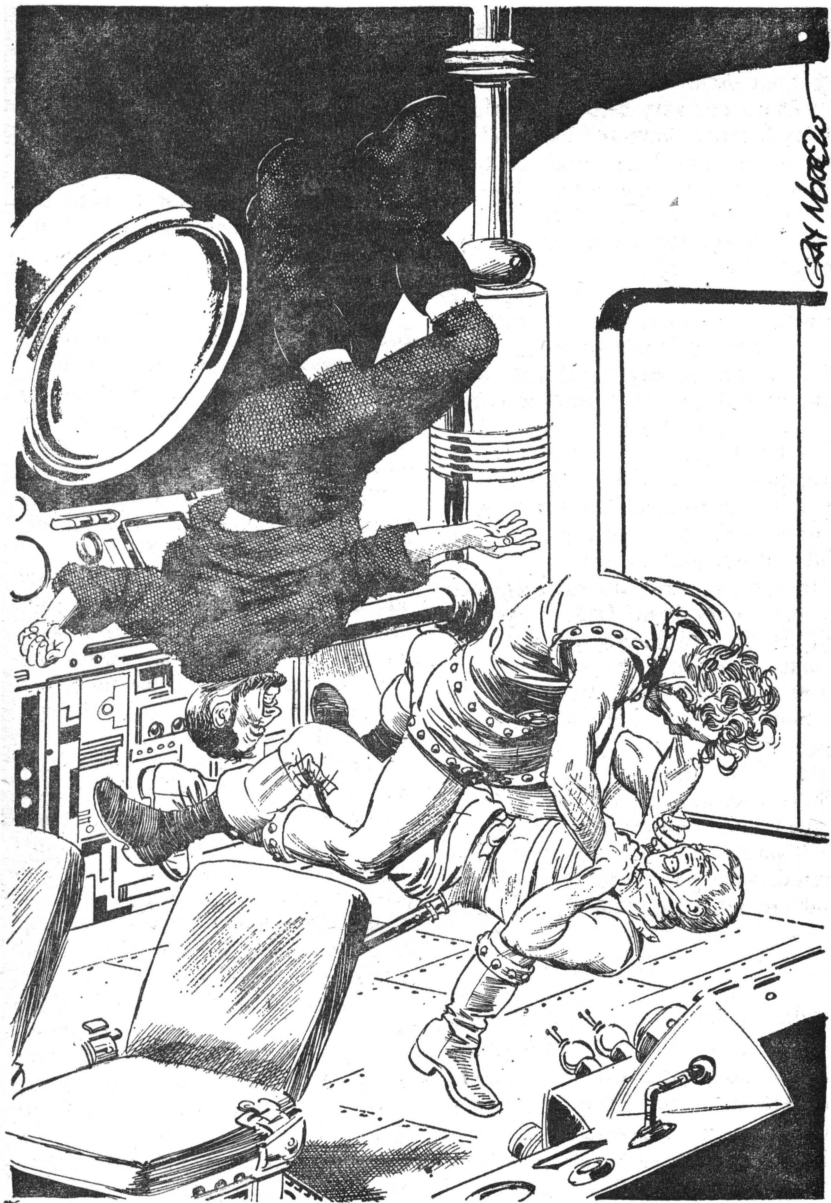
"That *ruffian!*" he exploded. "He carries arms all about him! He offered violence to *me!* And on Annanworld! You must calm him, Spartak, and persuade him to enter. Already there's a jeering crowd from the village beyond the gate, and more are gathering all the time."

"Let me through, and I'll talk with him," Spartak said.

"But calm him, and bring him in," Brother Ulwyn stressed, reaching for the bunch of keys that swung at his girdle. "Do you know, I think if the peephole had been larger he'd have dragged me through it?"

Moments later Spartak emerged on to the dusty roadway that led up from the village in the valley a short walk distant. As Ulwyn had said, a crowd had gathered on the other side of the road, grinning and chattering. A few paces away from them, sitting on a milestone and looking thunderously angry, was Vix, the sword-scar about which the novice had spoken milk-white on his rage-





THE ALTAR AT ASCONEL

red cheek. It was small wonder that Ulwyn had been agitated; across his back Vix wore an energy gun which would probably have been capable of razing the gatehouse with a single bolt.

Spartak threw his hood back on his shoulders. Vix stood up. He spoke his brother's name in a strange, uncertain voice: "Spartak?"

"Yes, it's I. Though the beard is new to my face since last we met."

All the fury, and with it all the spirit, seemed to drain out of Vix in an instant. "So it's true," he said wearily, and spat in the dust.

Puzzled, the gaping countryfolk fell silent, apart from one who laughed. But he too was silent the moment after Vix had scythed at him with a murderous glare.

"Vix!" Spartak cried, and lost the self control which ten years on Ananworld had ingrained in him. He caught up his robe and closed the distance between himself and his half-brother in a dozen loping strides, the loose soles of his sandals slapping up little clouds of yellow dust. "Was that why you came to seek me out?"

Vix set his hands squarely on his hips. He had to throw back his head to look directly into the younger man's eyes. He was head and shoulders shorter of the two, but made up in muscles like steel springs.

"Hodat is dead. Murdered," Vix cried. "And a usurper has made himself Warden. And he has brought a foul cult from no one knows where, and his evil priests lord it over the citizens of Asconel!"

"But — when? How?" Spartak clutched at the other's arm, a torrent of questions rising in his mind.

"The news was already stale when it reached me on Batyra Dap. My first thought was to raise forces and liberate the planet, but it costs hard cash to hire an army, and I've — not been so lucky as I hoped." A grim sardonic twist drew up half his mouth; the sword-slash seemed to have paralyzed the other side of his lips. "And anyway, by this time Bucyon—that's his name, mark it well—has by all reports made a cringing pack of dogs of our once-proud people."

Abruptly aware of where they stood on the hot dry road, Spartak said, "Come inside. Take refreshment and tell me there."

"They won't let me in," Vix grunted.

"Not you—the weapons you wear. We're an Order sworn to absolute non-violence; no knife, sword or gun is permitted inside the gate. But you may safely leave your weapons with Brother Ulwyn, and collect them on departure."

"Much help you'll be," Vix sighed. "To think I came so far, and find you bound by an oath to abjure violence—when that's what it'll take to set our homeland free!!"

### III

"A fine comfortable backwater you picked yourself!" Vix exploded.

He was in a padded chair in the anteroom of the refectory. The order to which Spartak had pledged him-

self had a tradition of hospitality to travellers, and it had only taken a word about Vix's journey to the chief steward to produce a meal of cold meats, bread and fruit such as the Warden himself on Asconel would have been proud to present. Also there was wine aplenty, though not stronger drink nor any of the Imperial euphorics like ancinarid. The rules of the foundation decreed a clear head.

Vix drained his wine-mug and offered it for replenishment to the gray-robed novice waiting on them.

"By the stars, I haven't had a meal like this in five years! And to think I was fool enough to pick a fighting order for myself!"

Startled, Spartak blinked at him. "You joined an order too?"

Mouth full, Vix nodded. "I took service with one of the rump forces left over from the Imperial collapse, full of bigheaded ideas about re-imposing galactic rule on the rebellious worlds. But it's all comet-dust. I've slept on the bare ground as often as not, drunk dirty water till the medics had to stick me full of needles and bathe me in rays, collected this scar and others which I can't show in polite company . . . Ah, but it hasn't all been so bad. I've enjoyed myself in my own fashion, for if I hadn't I'd have dug myself a piece of mud somewhere and planted corn."

He swallowed the last of his food, leaned back in his chair, and burped enormously. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he stared at Spartak.

"You're waiting there very calm

and smug, aren't you?" he accused. "I thought you'd ply me with questions all the time I was eating!"

"I was sure you'd tell me in your own good time," Spartak answered peaceably. He was going to have to tread very carefully in his dealings with this irascible older brother, that was plain. "In any case, the shock of hearing Hodat was dead seems to have—" he made a vague gesture—"chilled my mind, so to speak. I can hardly credit it."

"Ah, you always were a corked bottle. Ashamed to show your feelings in front of anyone else. If you have any feelings, that is." With the solid food in his guts, Vix was reverting to his normal manner.

Spartak flushed. "I'm sorry. It's true I've spent more time reading than talking these past several years. But it's in a good cause," he added defensively, thinking to penetrate the other's hostility. "I'm working on a history of Asconel."

"Faugh! I'm not concerned with the dead past. I'm worried about the future. Don't your books tell you that that's under our control, while the past is what we find it and we can't set it to rights?" Another gulp of wine, and once more the mug held out for refilling. "Besides, I don't much hold with working at a distance. Asconel is its own history."

"I—" On the verge of a hot objection, Spartak checked. "I'll tell you something, too," he continued after a moment's pause. "That's a far more philosophical remark than I ever expected to hear from your lips!"

"By the nine moons of Argus, if

you can't learn something in ten years' travelling, you might as well be dead." Vix put his hand to his waist, as though uncomfortable at the absence of his sidearms. "And I'm not dead. Well, let's not bicker. I'll tell you what I can."

Spartak bit back a retort. He was now absorbing the important points of what Vix had told him: Hodat dead, a usurper ruling Asconel, some cult with an arrogant priesthood dominating the citizens. All this added up to a frightening whole.

Vix said: "This woman Lydis appeared one day, off a ship from no one knows where. Somehow, she got herself to the attention of Hodat, and once they'd met, things went out of control. He said, so the story runs, that this woman knew his innermost thoughts—that she was like a part of himself. Before anyone knew what had happened, she was being talked of as his wife-to-be.

"True, for a while things went well enough, I'm told. The witch Lydis was said to be beautiful, which is a good start for any woman, although she never appeared in public except in a long black gown with a veil over her hair. Like Borin foresaw, there was a plot to depose Hodat because of some degree or other, and allegedly she warned him of it, having seen into the minds of those who planned it."

"A telepathic mutant," Spartak muttered.

"Then the priests of Belizuek started to come in. It had always been Imperial policy that if any-

one was fool enough to want to spend time talking to idols or the empty air they should be allowed to get on with it, so under the guise of religious freedom they were permitted to land. Hodat started listening to them a great deal. I ought to say this was some cult to which Lydis herself adhered, by the way—said it was from her home world of Brinze.

"I guess it was the sacrifices which sparked the last resistance in Hodat. Bemused though he was by the witch, he yet had enough love for Asconel and its people to refuse that horrible last step."

"Sacrifices?" Spartak heard his own voice utter the word an infinitely long way away. "Not — human sacrifices?"

"Human," Vix echoed, and the word seemed to curdle the air of the room. "And it was then, while Hodat yet refused, that Bucyon came from space with a fleet the equal of the one I used to fight with over by Batyra Dap — ex-Imperial ships.

"They took over. They killed Hodat. And Bucyon sits in the Warden's chair with Lydis at his side—she having been the bait dangled ahead of Hodat to lead him to disaster. And Asconel is a ruin of all our father's hopes."

"Is there no resistance to the usurper?" Spartak whispered.

"Some, some. I hear that Tigrid Zen—remember him?—is either in exile or in hiding on one of the outer planets of the home system, trying to find an opening in the net Bucyon has cast around Asconel. But there's no spirit in the people."

Spartak got blindly to his feet. He said, "I—I must go and speak to Father Erton, and tell him I'm called away. And then I'll fetch my belongings and come with you."

"Well!" Vix studied him. "That's more like the response I'd hoped for, late though it is. But I warn you, I can't tote all your beloved books and such around the galaxy! I've grown used to travelling light in these past ten years."

"My books are in my head," Spartak said quietly, and went out.

#### IV

Out in the corridor, Spartak paused as he snapped his fingers at a passing novice: Inform Father Erton I wish to see him, collect my belongings and pack them in my cases, have the kitchener prepare two travelpacks of food . . .

Then Spartak headed straight toward the library.

He entered the enormous hall with sufficient lack of the proper ceremony to draw a reproving glare from the Head Librarian, Brother Carl, in his high pulpit overlooking the entire array of more than five hundred low-walled cubicles. But he barely noticed that; he was concerned only to spot a vacant cubicle on the master plan-board and make his way to it as quickly as possible.

There was a place unoccupied at Aisle II, Rank Five. He almost broke into a run as he approached it. Without bothering to close the door behind him he dropped into the single chair and punched a rapid succession of buttons on the panel

which formed the only other feature of the tiny booth. One finger poised to stab the PRESENTATION button, he hesitated; then he decided it was best to have a permanent record, and run the risk of the knowledgeable library computers swamping him with a flood of literature. He punched for a print-out instead of spoken or screened data.

Then he took a deep breath. "Brinze," he said. "Planet, presumed habitable, location unknown."

He waited in a mood of grim expectancy. It was all very well for Port Controller Grydnik, out on Asconel — which was, after all, rather an isolated world—to state that Brinze didn't exist because there was no Imperial record of it. But the records of Annanworld weren't so parochial.

The library disgorged a small plain card, no larger than the palm of his hand, from the slot at the base of the panel. Dismayed, Spartak picked it up and read it. It ran:

"BRINZE, planet presumed habitable, location unknown. No data. Request verify basis for question."

He tore the card across and threw it away. "Belizuek," he said. "Religious cult or feature of cult."

The answering card was slightly larger, but not much. On it were the words: "BELIZUEK, title and object of veneration of religious cult introduced to former Imperial space at ASCONEL (q.v.) approximately four years ago. No data on origins. No data on ritual. Unconfirmed reports of human sacrifice posted as IMPROBABLE."

"Bucyon," Spartak said. "Per-

sonal name. Lydis, personal name.” Deliberately he refrained from cross-referencing to Asconel. The fact that the library contained information even as meagre as what it had given him on this mysterious Belizuek cult had taken him aback; he had imagined that in his ten-year research for his projected history of his home planet he had exhausted every single reference in the entire store.

“BUCYON,” the third card said. “Present Warden of Asconel. LYDIS, present consort of Bucyon. Unconfirmed reports of usurpation by violence posted as —”

He didn't bother to see under what delicate category the memory of the library had entered those reports. He crumpled the card and tossed it aside in fury.

“I'm an idiot,” he growled.

This material the library was supplying to him was nothing more than the siftings of the story Vix himself had just told in the refractory ante-room. Brother Ulwyn, in the gatehouse, must have informed the library as a matter of routine that a visitor from Asconel had arrived, and the library, finding it lacked recent news of that planet, had automatically eavesdropped on this much-travelled stranger. Techniques like these had been partially responsible for making Annanworld into the most notable of all the Empire's information centres.

For some minutes after that, he just sat. He had hoped to present a whole stack of data about Brinze and Belizuek to Vix, as some sort of justification for having hidden

away in this placid backwater. Vix's gibe was half-true, he had to admit. And it turned out there was nothing in the library but the same rumors, now rendered third-hand.

The door of the cubicle was pushed aside, and a startled offworld student was there, carrying a recorder. “Oh! Excuse me, Brother, but this cubicle was shown vacant on—”

“That's all right,” Spartak said, rising with limbs that seemed to have stiffened from the passage of a lifetime. “I forgot to shut the door. But I've done what I came to do, anyway.”

“You'll forgive me,” Father Erton said in his wheezy ancient voice. He was very old; rumor placed him at well past the century mark. “I should perhaps not say this. We are a center for study and distribution of information, and it's only a courtesy obligation that we place on those who make such extensive use of our facilities as you have done, to recompense us with some original work before leaving.” But he loaded the words with a glare, and Spartak, who had always regarded the Master of his order with great respect, felt impelled to excuse himself against the implied charge.

“I have no intention of departing permanently, Father,” he said. “It is simply that this news—”

“Moreover,” Father Erton continued, totally ignoring the interruption, “Brother Ulwyn gives us most unfavorable reports of this half-brother of yours who comes to drag you away. Says he is violent in the extreme. Heavily armed.”

"But Asconel is one of the few—"

"You may have no intention of departing permanently," Father Erton proceeded, as though his ears and mouth were keeping different time-scales, the gap between them amounting to several seconds. "But someone else—for example, the alleged usurper of Asconel—may take no notice of what you plan. And your chance to return will be . . . *ppfft!*"

"I'm sorry, my mind is made —"

"Most crucial of all is my final point. If you leave here and while absent infringe the vow you took to renounce all forms of violence, you cannot be re-admitted." Father Erton leaned back with an effort and stared at Spartak.

"I am not by temperament a violent person," Spartak forced out, acutely conscious that Father Erton's refusal to listen to a word he had to say had made him long to employ a great deal of violence on his sparse gray pate. "My intention is merely to—"

"Your intention is to throw away ten years of valuable study on a heroic gesture. You may well not return alive, and even if you do you stand the same chance of turning back the calendar as I would have of combating a tidal wave. I understand your attachment to Asconel. Why, I myself, after seventy years, still occasionally find myself nostalgic for my own birthworld! And that the appeal comes from your half-brother makes it even more understandable that you should be tempted. Nonetheless, I urge prudence, a night's sleep before your

final decision, and—best of all—a reconsideration."

Spartak got to his feet, a cold rage filling his breast. "Now listen to me," he said between his teeth. "You know what's going to happen here? One of these days someone who doesn't give a yard of a comet's tail for some hypothetical Second Galactic Empire is going to remember Annanworld, and he'll whistle up a few score jollyboys with armed starships and knock this pretty study down around your ears. Then he'll pick over the survivors and choose out the girls for raping and some of the novices for general drudgery, and loot the wreckage for enough to last him out a lifetime of luxury. And if this doesn't happen, it's going to be because a few places like Asconel and Loudor and Delcadore held to the oldfashioned ways, stood up for justice and order and the rule of law and did their best to keep the pirates and the slavers and the privateers from off your neck!"

Father Erton gazed up at him unblinkingly. He said, "It's taken you ten years, has it, to come around to this way of thinking?"

"No. More like ten minutes!"

"Then go," Father Erton sighed. "But remember! If you commit yourself to violence, save the expense of coming back!"

## V

They went a considerable distance in silence, with no one else in sight except some children on a hill-top, playing some game with a long white stick.

Spartak was engaged with his own bitter thoughts, and was anyway used to long hours of private study and contemplation. It was not until they were almost halfway to the village that he spoke.

"How did you come here? By the regular space-lines?"

"Blazes, no. In this corner of the galaxy, shipping schedules are down to monthly, sometimes bi-monthly frequencies. I should sit on my butt while they get around to organizing a crew and lifting their creaky old tubs? No, I have my own ship now."

"Your own ship?" Spartak echoed in surprise. "You've done well. I've not heard of a privately owned starship before."

"Don't picture any ship of the line," Vix grunted. "I have an Imperial scout, probably one of the original ships they tell me we found when we came out into space the very first time. I've never dared compute how old she must be."

"Twenty thousand years," Spartak said positively.

"Twenty—?" It was Vix's turn to be astonished. "Oh, never!"

"If it's one of the original Imperial vessels, it must be. According to what events you take as marking the establishment and the collapse of the Empire, it lasted something between eight and a half and nine thousand years. By the time we came out to collect them, the various artifacts our predecessors left behind were already at least as old as the whole lifespan of the Empire."

"This is something I've never got straight in my mind," Vix said slowly. He seemed to be groping for

some subject of conversation which would be sufficiently neutral to let him get to know this stranger-brother of his, who had adopted a way of life so alien to his temperament and yet now had to be his companion and confidant. "I guess you must have put in a deal of study on it—hm?"

"I did when I first came to Annanworld," Spartak agreed. "I had this over-ambitious idea that I was going to find out how the Empire originally arose. But the records simply don't exist. What little had been recorded was either destroyed or simply rotted away. We've never had the skills required to build something to last ten thousand years. Even an Empire!"

"But—well, at least you can tell me how it is we're still flying ships supposed to be as old as you just said?"

"We've made some intelligent guesses. The best and most likely is that at some time in their own history the people who left the ships behind lost interest in physical activity, and built sufficient ships and some few other items to last out their—well, maybe their lifespan. Or else they went to another galaxy because they'd studied this one from rim to rim and exhausted it and themselves. But they'd built well. It took us ten thousand years to use up what they left behind."

"It's not used up yet, *not* by a long way," Vix countered.

"**Y**es, but what time couldn't do to those ships, we've done deliberately. It costs to buy a ship,



but it doesn't cost anything to run one, for they're self-fuelling and almost indestructible. The Argian fleet numbered one hundred and one million vessels at the height of Imperial power, and there must have been almost one thousand times as many as that in service throughout the galaxy. Yet now—as you just said—there are so few ships you may wait a month for passage on what used to be a flourishing Imperial starlane.”

“We're building some ships of our own, though.”

“Where? Not in Imperial space, Vix. Out on the Rim, where the Imperial writ never ran. I sometimes think I'd like to go out there, to see what human endeavor can do by itself, without accidental help from a vanished race.”

“A long trip without much prospect of reward,” Vix said. “Me, I'll stick around the hub. Numbers like a hundred million can't mean much to a man unless he's prepared to think of planets as grains of dust and human beings as less than bacteria. And no one raised on a world as sweet as Asconel could do that.”

Spartak shifted his heavy load to the opposite shoulder. He was a little relieved at what Vix had just said. In the years since they last met, this fiery older brother of his had clearly matured as Tiorin had done, and there was a good chance, he reasoned, of their becoming friends at last.

“How did you come by your ship?” Spartak asked eventually, after casting around for some way of keeping the talk moving.

“Took it as my pay after we put

down the rebellion of the old Twenty-Seventh Fleet.”

Spartak swallowed dryness and was glad when the other left the subject where it lay.

“That's not all I've picked up, by any means. Though most of what I've had I've spent as fast as I got it. Matter of fact, I guess there may be some problems if you've fallen into the ways of these sexless monks you've kept so much company with.”

“You have a girl with you?” Spartak suggested.

“That's right.”

“A slave?”

“I don't like the tone of your voice,” Vix said sharply. “I don't pay her regular wages, if that's what you mean. But I keep her, feed her, clothe her—and she does the chores for me that a woman usually does for a man. But there are other reasons why a girl keeps company with a man without being enslaved. Have you forgotten, cooped up in your hermitage here?”

“Have you been together long?” Spartak inquired peaceably. He was tempted to correct Vix's mistaken idea of the life led by his order, but did not.

“About five years altogether.” Vix brightened a little; they were in full sight of the transport terminus in the village. “Ah! From here we can get to the spaceport in under the hour.”

“There she is,” he exclaimed, throwing up a proud arm to point. “The smallest vessel in sight, but mine. Go over and stow your bags. I have to pay port dues and

get clearance—they still observe all sorts of old-fashioned rules and regulations here.”

“Ah—this girl of yours,” Spartak ventured. “What’s her name, for when I meet her?”

“Vineta. Don’t worry. She knows it’s you coming back with me, if anyone off this world does.”

Spartak shrugged and made off across the hard gray surface of the port. A great deal must have changed in the last few years, he reflected, for his brother to have secured a ship of his own. Governments of planets, great trading enterprises, and other corporate organizations had owned ships under the Empire; if these bodies were letting go of the items most indispensable to the continuance of galactic trade and communication, decay must have spread far and fast.

There was one exception to the list of ship-owners he’d mentally made: pirates sometimes claimed to own their ships absolutely. But he preferred not to linger on that idea.

He came close to the ship now. The access ladder was down; awkwardly he clambered to the top, his bags swinging. He rapped on the door of the lock, thinking: *twenty thousand years! It is incredible!*

When no one opened to him, he tested the manual lock release. It opened the door for him.

He frowned. It was unlike Vix to risk leaving the ship thus. But perhaps this girl of his felt safe on her own. He climbed inside and called aloud. “Ah—Vineta? Are you there?”

But there was no one in any of

the accessible compartments of the vessel: control cabin, living quarters, sleeping quarters, sanitary facilities were all empty.

He was standing, puzzled, in the control room when Vix came stamping aboard, and forestalled the redhead’s questions with a curt sentence.

“She wasn’t here when I arrived.”

“What? Vineta! *Vineta!*”

The harsh sound reverberated in the hollow hull. No answer came. Vix set to searching, as Spartak had just done, and came back moments later with his face a mask of fury.

“Gone!” he roared. “After all I’ve done for her, to walk out like this—take to her heels without even clearing out her gear! The little baggage! The little radiation-spawned sweet-tongued—”

“Vix,” Spartak said very softly, “are you altogether surprised?”

“What do you mean by that?” the redhead blasted.

“I remember from—from back home. The way you used to treat your women sooner or later turned them against you. And the life you’ve been leading isn’t the sort which would make you any more gentle.”

“So you think she just waited till my back was turned and ran for it?”

“Not exactly. But Annanworld had quite a reputation. Isn’t it possible that she decided she was tired of a roving life? She’ll never have been to Asconel, probably never stopped on any single world with you for more than a short stay —”

“What are you talking like this for? You never even saw the girl!” Vix wiped away sweat that had started on his forehead. “Ach! Go

stow your gear in the lower cabin. That was hers, and some of her things are still there. I'm going to ask the port authorities what became of her, and fetch her back by her hair if I have to."

He gave his half-brother a final withering glare. "Well, move! Or would you rather I left her behind, because it might embarrass you to have my mistress here in such a confined space? Is that why you're trying to talk me into thinking it's my fault? If she was going to run off she could have done it on a dozen other worlds without waiting for this precious favorite of yours!"

Spartak said nothing, but picked up his bags and made his way to the lower cabin as directed.

## VI

A frown of self-directed anger pulling his brows into deep furrows over his nose, Spartak glanced around the lower cabin, barely taking in the pathetic few belongings which bore witness to the occupancy of it by the girl Vineta. He had not meant to spark an argument with Vix; it was simply that ten years on Annanworld had accustomed him to going straight to the point in the interests of exposing the truth, and he had largely forgotten how to use tact. He had been shorn of most of his false conceptions of himself, and was glad to have lost them. But it made no odds that Vix had almost certainly treated his girl the same as he had always treated women—even beating her occasionally. To have told him that she had probably

grown tired of him and run off was a stupid error.

Sighing, he cleared away the miscellaneous junk disposed on the shelves and in the drawers. Without his at first realizing, they made a picture to him: a kind of implied portrait of their owner. This curiously shaped seashell, from some planet where the mollusca had a copper-based metabolism to judge by the bluish sheen of the lining; this necklet of rock crystal, pink and blue and yellow; this solido of two smiling elderly folk—her parents, possibly?

It wasn't until he came to tall closets in the far corner and found half a dozen costumes hanging there, together with a small stringed instrument which he did not recognize, that he checked and started to think seriously about the conclusions he ought to draw. Even then he went ahead with what he had originally intended — changing clothes, putting aside the brown robe of his order in favor of garments not worn since his arrival on Annanworld, but still a fair fit to his body, whose leanness had remained constant since his late adolescence.

There was a reminder in that stringed instrument of his own mother, who had been a wandering singer and teacher. It was the means of getting a living. Surely that, and the clothing, would not have been left behind, no matter how eager she was to escape Vix and lose herself on Annanworld? And it was still less likely that she should have abandoned small souvenir items, like the solido, which were no bur-

den to carry and presumably held emotional significance for her.

*Maybe she went aground to buy something*, he told himself at last, marvelling how sluggish his mind had been made by the annoyance his disagreement with Vix had caused. *I must tell Vix not to do anything rash* —

In that instant, when he stood with one leg in his old but serviceable breeches of Vellian silk, the ship's gravity went on, and within seconds he felt the surging of the drive.

This was not the slickly smooth operation of a large liner, elaborately maintained for the passengers' comfort — like the only other vessels in which he had ever flown space. It was the jarring violence of a scoutship stripped for action, without frills, and seemed to vibrate all the way into his belly, triggering a reflex nausea.

He resisted it in near-panic, thinking what foul company Vix would be if he worked out for himself, many systems distant, what Spartak had just deduced from the clothing still in the cabin.

He struggled out into the corridor, and as he turned from sliding shut the cabin door caught a glimpse of movement at the foot of the companionway leading up to the control room. It was too brief, and the drive-induced nausea was now too strong, for him to get a clear view of the person who had gone by, but the obvious deduction was that Vineta was aboard after all.

He had no time to work out where she might have been hiding.

He was completely unfamiliar with this design of ship, and if Vix hadn't found her she must have concealed herself very thoroughly. Or else Vix himself wasn't yet aware of all the nooks and crannies in his prized new possession . . .

No, rational thought was beyond him at the moment. Wait till the drive settled down to free-space operation. That would be soon enough to solve the riddle.

He was on the point of returning to his cabin when he heard the cry. "*Spa-ar-tak!*"

And the drive went off.

The shock was like a dash of cold water, clearing the fog from his brain. With reflex speed he made for the companionway, scrambling up it with the agility of a Sirian ape.

The shock was renewed as soon as he saw what was happening in the control room. It was no girl that he had glimpsed passing this way. It was a man, huge and bulky as a Thanis bull, his hair wild, his body cased in crude leather harness and his feet in steel-tipped boots, who now was wrestling chest-to-chest with the tough but far smaller Vix, overbearing the redhead in a crushing embrace.

Vix tried to butt him on the nose, failed as the attacker jerked his head back, lost his balance to one of the steel-tipped boots as it cracked against his ankle, and went slamming down to the floor.

He had had no time to draw his sidearms, obviously. Perhaps he'd mistaken the sound of the stranger's

approach for Spartak's. But he'd done well in the first instance, for a short sword lay at the foot of the control board; his assailant's, logically, which he had somehow contrived to dash from his grip.

Horrified, Spartak saw the two antagonists crash to their full length, saw the stranger break Vix's grasp on his right wrist and force his hand closer and closer to the red-head's throat. Wild pleading showed in the green eyes, but there was no breath available for him to call for aid again.

To renounce his oath so soon? To pick up the sword from the floor and drive it into the stranger's back? It could be done, but —

And then he remembered, as clearly as if he were hearing it in present time, the voice of one of his earliest tutors on Annanworld. "Always bear in mind that the need for violence is an illusion. If it seems that violence is unavoidable, what this means is that you've left the problem too late before starting to tackle it."

Spartak dodged the struggling men and made for the control board. As he scanned the totally unfamiliar switches, he heard a sobbing cry from Vix — "Spartak, Spartak, he's going to strangle me!"

Time seemed to plod by for him, while racing at top speed for his brother. But at last he thought he had it. He put one hand on the back of the pilot chair, and with the other slammed a switch over past its neutral points to the opposite extreme of its traverse.

Instantly he went heels over head.



GRANT MORROW

But he was prepared for this; in effect, he fell to the ceiling like a gymnast turning a somersault, and landed on his feet with a jar that shook him clear to the hips. The universe rolled insanely around him.

Through a swirling mist of giddiness he saw that what he had intended had indeed come about. Locked in their muscle-straining embrace, Vix and the unknown had crashed ten feet to the ceiling as the gravity reversed, and now Vix was on top — and breaking free! For the force of the upside-down fall had completely stunned the stranger.

Spartak reached out, clutching Vix by the loose baldric on which he normally slung his energy-gun, and reversed the gravity once more, restoring its normal direction. The attacker slammed to the floor again while he and Vix fell rather less awkwardly; this time, he moved the switch with careful slowness, not exceeding a quarter-gravity till he felt his soles touch the floor.

And then he said, "Who is he?"

"I — I —" Vix put his hands to his temples and pressed, breathing in enormous sobbing gasps. "What did you *do*?"

"I put the gravity over to full negative."

"But —" Vix began to recover — "but — how? Do you know these ships, then?"

"No, I've never seen one before. But it followed logically. There's always an automatic gravity compensator on a starship, for high-gee maneuvering in normal space. It seemed reasonable to expect a man-

ual override on a vessel like this which might get damaged during combat."

"You mean you just took a chance on it, while he was throttling the life out of me?" Vix exploded.

Clearly the redhead had suffered one of the worst frights of his life. Spartak hesitated.

"Why didn't you just pick up his sword and run him through with it?" Vix blasted on.

"Ah — well, if I'd done that," Spartak countered in the calmest tone he could manage, "he wouldn't have been able to tell us who he is and why he set on you. As it is, here he's no more than stunned. And you're alive to ask him questions."

"I guess so," Vix agreed sullenly, and gave the dazed attacker a prod in the ribs with his foot. "I look forward to beating some answers out of him, at that. Here, I'll put some lashings on him before he wakes up."

He started to a corner chest in search of ropes.

"I don't think you'll have to beat the information out," Spartak ventured. "I have some stuff with me which will probably make him talk a lot faster than that."

"Such as what?" Vix found a length of braided leather and a short flexible chain, and started to bind the man's limbs.

"I — uh — brought some medical things I thought might come in handy," Spartak said, swallowing hard. Ever since his childhood, fighting and violence had physically upset him, and the glee in Vix's

voice as he proposed torturing the man to make him talk had picked up the backwash of the nausea from the drive and redoubled it. "I'll go fetch it right away!"

But first, he told himself, he'd better take a dose of something to calm his own stomach.

He was at the door of the lower cabin, fumbling to open the sliding panel, when he felt the knocking beneath his feet.

Astonished, he stared down at the flooring of featureless metal plates. The knocking came again, more vigorously, and his eyes suddenly spotted a small cluster of new bright scratches at one end of the plate on which he stood.

"By the moons of Argus!" he exploded, and dropped to his knees to lever up the plate and push it aside.

In the compartment thus revealed lay the missing Vineta, a crude cloth gag in her mouth, her clothing torn and a huge bruise discoloring the soft olive skin of her right cheek. She was small and slender, but even so her assailant had had to cram her by main force into the tiny space under the floor.

Frantically he lifted her out and set her on her feet; she stood for a second holding on to him, shaking out her space-black hair, then seemed to recover a little and let go of his arm. He made to remove the gag, but she shook her head and tore it out herself.

"Are you Vix's brother?" she whispered. Her voice was hoarse.

"Yes — yes, I'm Spartak."

"Is he —?"

"He's all right. He's up in the control room tying up the man who attacked him — and you too, presumably. How did it happen?"

"He had a message sent from the port controller to say he was some sort of official." Vineta swallowed painfully. "And Vix had told me that on Annanworld they had lots of regulations left over from Imperial days, which we'd have to comply with or be delayed in leaving. So I let him come aboard."

She passed a weary hand over her forehead and then touched the bruise on her cheek, wincing. "Thank you for letting me out," she whispered. "I was so afraid . . ."

And she turned to hurry in search of Vix.

Spartak watched her go. The rips in her costume exposed much more of her tight, firm body than he cared to see, and a completely irrational envy overcame him against his will, at the thought of the endless succession of beautiful women Vix had enjoyed and abandoned. Contrary to the assumption Vix had made, his order on Annanworld didn't demand celibacy, and even Father Erton had kept up an association with a woman in the same specialization as himself which had endured for almost thirty years. But his own two or three attempts to form such a relationship had floundered on his shyness and his reluctance to detach himself from his studies.

Now, without warning, he found he was wistful, as if he had left some very important part out of his life.

The last thing he expected to find when he returned to the control room clutching his large black medical case was a full-blown shouting match. But he heard it even before he came in. Vix was bellowing at the girl.

"You realize he could have killed me? You just let him in. Opened the lock for him and let him in! You didn't keep a gun on him, or anything sensible like that — oh, no, you wouldn't have thought of it!"

"But you told me yourself we had to . . .!" The answer dissolved on a high note which foreshadowed tears.

"What conceivable reason could the controller have to send someone aboard before I got back?" Vix thundered. "I ought to take the hide off you!"

Spartak pushed the door aside, and Vineta ran into him blindly, making headlong for the privacy of the lower cabin. He caught her with his free hand, and spoke sharply to Vix.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself! Just because you've been scared white, that's no reason to take it out on her. She's had a worse shock than you have — look at that bruise on her! And you know where I found her? Folded up like an embryo in a tiny hole under the floor of the lower corridor! Here," he added in a gentler tone to the girl, looking for a place to set down his medical case. "I'll put something on the bruise

and give you a pill to calm your nerves."

She accepted his ministrations dumbly, swallowed the pill as directed, and whispered, "Can I go now?"

"Lie down for a while. You'll be all right." Spartak gave her a comforting pat on the shoulder and stood aside for her to leave.

"I'm — sorry," Vix said with an effort as the door slid to. "You're right. I oughtn't to talk to her that way."

"It's better to think of points like that in advance and not afterwards," Spartak answered curtly, and crossed the floor to drop to his knees beside the bound man. "Hm! How long has he been awake?"

"Awake?" Vix echoed in astonishment. "I thought he was still knocked out."

"Hold it," Spartak rapped, foreseeing that Vix's next impulse would be to kick the man into talking. "Let's see what I can do to loosen his tongue before you —" He reached behind him for an injector and a small phial of grayish liquid.

"What are you going to give him?" Vix demanded.

"It's one of the old Imperial drugs. Not really meant as a truth drug, but supposed to bring forgotten experiences back to consciousness during psychotherapy." With deft fingers he loaded the injector.

"Why did you think that of all drugs might come in handy?" Vix grunted. "Think I might be precessing my gyros, maybe?"

"You do take everything personally, don't you?" Spartak sighed. "As



a matter of fact, I thought it might help us to find out how this Belizuek cult gets the hold it's supposed to have over apparently rational people like Hodat. There," he added, shooting the dose into the bound man's wrist veins.

"How long does it take to work?"

"A few seconds. Open your eyes, you!"

The bound man complied after an obvious struggle to go on feigning unconsciousness.

"Who are you? Where are you from?" Spartak asked.

"I'm —" Another, equally unsuccessful struggle to still his tongue, and a yielding. "I'm Korisu, and I come from Asconel."

"From —!" Vix took a pace forward in amazed horror.

"What was your mission and who ordered you to do it?"

**H**is eyes fixed open and seeming glazed, the man whispered, "I was sent by Bucyon to track down Vix and kill him."

"Why?" thundered Vix.

"Because he'd heard that you planned to raise an army and depose him, and wipe out Belizuek on Asconel."

"I'm Spartak, Vix's half-brother," Spartak said softly. "Does my name mean anything to you?"

"Y-yes. After I'd found and killed Vix, since I was on Annanworld anyway, I was to locate you and eliminate you as well."

"Has someone been sent after Tiorin?" Vix demanded.

"I — I don't know for sure. I think so. But nobody knew where he

was when I left home. There was a rumor that he had gone towards the hub, to travel in what's left of the Empire. Someone mentioned Delcadore."

"Then that's where we'll go!" Vix declared, and strode towards the control board.

"Just a moment," Spartak said. "There are some other things I want to set straight. You, Korisu. Are you a follower of Belizuek?"

"Of course I am. Everyone on Asconel is nowadays."

Vix uttered a filthy string of oaths.

"What is Belizuek?"

"He is all-seeing and all-powerful. He reads the inmost thoughts of men and no one can stand against him. He's a superior being. Men ought to recognize that and serve him."

"Is he a telepathic mutation from human stock?"

"I've never seen him. But the priests say he's different. Superior. Deserving of our worship."

Spartak wiped sweat from his face. "I'm told he demands human sacrifices. Is that true?"

"No, of course not!" Shocked, the bound man tried to sit up, and failed. "The priests say it's blasphemy to call it sacrifice. It's a free-will offering! It's an honor to serve Belizuek in that way just as in any other."

Spartak's jaw set in a grim line. If in such a short time Bucyon and his consort Lydis had managed to persuade the citizens of Asconel that this transcendent rubbish was the revealed and mystic truth, their mis-

son wasn't going to be confined to so simple a task as deposing the usurper and restoring the rightful Warden.

"Where does Belizuek come from?"

"The priests say he's existed since the beginning of the galaxy."

"Then where is Brinze?"

"That's where Shry and Bucyon and Lydis and some of the others come from. But I don't know where it lies."

"Delcadore," Vix muttered to himself, over at the control board. "I'd not meant to go so close to the hub. There are still idiots around there with dreams of Imperial glory, and it's risky. But if that's where Tiorin is said to be . . ." He glanced over his shoulder. "I have a course set up now. Anything more you want from him?"

"Not right now." Spartak straightened. "What shall we do with him?"

"Put him where he put Vineta. Why not?"

"No, that's too small — literally and absolutely. In a closet we can lock, that would do."

"There's an empty one next to the head," Vix grunted. "I'll help you lug him down there."

Still weary from the mental strain as well as from the physical effort of hauling the reluctant Korisu to his prison, Spartak stole into the lower cabin. Vineta had stretched out on the left bunk, and was sleeping with deep and regular breathing. Near her pillow she had ranged the little objects to which she plainly attached a great deal of

value: the shell, the solido, the cheap jewelry.

Spartak put his medical case away and crept out again.

"You again, Spartak?" Vix called as he re-entered the control cabin. "Say — uh — I ought to thank you. I guess I was too shaken up to remember. It was very smart, the way you stopped the fight. And it was just as well we tackled him your way and not mine. Apart from anything else, I imagine you're now convinced that I wasn't spinning you a wild fantasy about what's happened on Asconel!"

Spartak shook his head distractedly. "It's incredible," he muttered. "The speed and completeness of the process, to have produced a fanatic like Korisu in so short a time. It almost persuades me that you were right about an element of witchcraft."

Vix hesitated. Then he put out his hand. "Brother, I was in two minds whether to go to Annanworld and seek you out. I wondered if I might not burden myself. But ten years is a slice out of any man's life, and love for a world like Asconel is enough of a bond to bring men together."

Spartak put his hand into the other's grasp.

But the full measure of Korisu's fanaticism did not emerge until much later — until the time when they went to feed him in his cramped prison and found that he had contrived to strangle himself, against all probability, with the braided leather Vix had used to bind his arms . . .

**T**he shadow of that incredible death still lay over them when they gathered in the control room to watch the planet Delcadore grow beyond the main ports. To break the intolerable silence between them, Vineta — recovered almost completely from her treatment at the hands of Korisu — spoke up.

“What sort of a world is this one, now?”

Vix, occupied with the controls, tossed an answering grunt over his shoulder. “Ask Spartak. He has the head full of knowledge. I’ve not followed the progress of events down here towards the hub. Still too rigid and organized for my taste, to be candid!”

The girl glanced at Spartak rather shyly. They had hardly yet got to know one another during this brief trip, and she had spent most of her time out of the way of both brothers, although Spartak had seen enough to convince him that Vix still at heart regarded women as expendable. Currently, he just did not have the time to get himself another if he lost Vineta, and was doing his clumsy best to keep on her right side.

“Well,” Spartak commenced, “this was formerly one of the main garrison systems for the Imperial fleet. When the Empire began to lose its outer reaches this was one of the — the foci, so to speak, on which retrenchments were made. I think it’s now effectively a frontier system. The Empire hasn’t vanished, of course, but only shrunk to a fraction of its former size.”

“That’s what’s worrying me,” Vix

interjected. “I’ve tangled with certain boneheaded parties who seem to imagine the Empire still flourishes. For my part, I think it’s now a farce, and will only prove a handicap to some new and more stable foundation.”

Spartak nodded in surprised agreement.

At that moment a light sprang up on the communicator panel, and Vix reached over to activate the circuit. A voice boomed out with a ring of crude authority. “Identify yourself and your ship!”

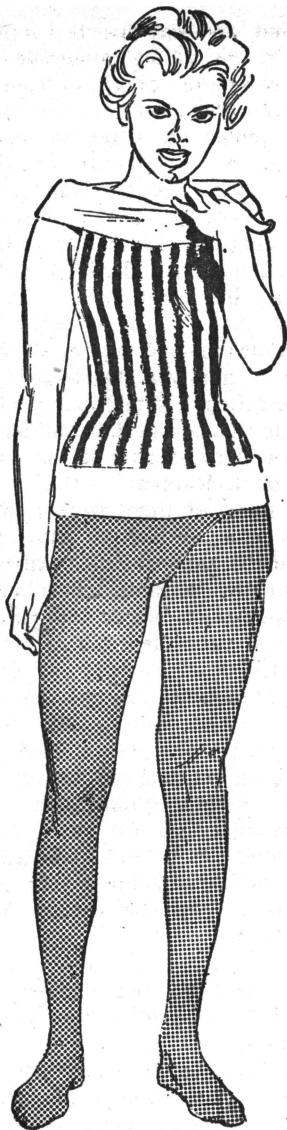
“See what I mean?” Vix muttered wryly, and added more loudly, for the benefit of the distant challenger, “Vix of Asconel piloting my own vessel, on private business and landing on Delcadore.”

“Asconel, hm?” The voice was as clear as if it came from the next room, even when at lower volume it continued, “Where in all of space is that?”

Other voices, much fainter but quite distinct, chimed in. “Asconel — isn’t that where . . .? Well, it’s off towards the Rim anyway, so I guess it’ll do . . . Anything to shift this problem off *my* back . . . Yes, we’ll settle for this one — we don’t want to wait till the galaxy freezes just to find a ship bound for the Big Dark or somewhere *really* distant . . .”

Vix and Spartak exchanged appalled glances, and the first voice roared out again.

“Vix of Asconel, you’re under Imperial requisition. Do you hear and understand? Your ship is under Imperial requisition. Do not attempt



EUNORA

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to evade this order, or it will be the worse for you?"

"What does this all mean?" Vineta whispered.

"Right now, that's what it means!" Vix replied in white-lipped fury, and gestured towards the viewpoint which moments ago had held only Delcadore, its larger moon and the stars beyond.

Now, like a monstrous fish swimming leisurely to intercept smaller prey, there loomed the gigantic shape of an Imperial ship of the line, the ancient Argian symbols blazoned at prow and stern, for all the galaxy as though Argus could still issue orders to a million planets, and prepared to back this false contention with the all-too-real support of fire-power equal to the output of a minor sun.

## VIII

Fighting and running were out of the question. When the order was given to take a landing on Delcadore under the escort of the Imperial battleship, Vix — punctuating his pilot work with oaths that seemed to grow fouler by the second — furiously complied, while Spartak tried to console him with the suggestion that at least so far they weren't being told to do anything but what they had intended all along.

Meanwhile, Vineta stood close against him, her large dark eyes fixed as though hypnotized on the hull of the escorting ship, her whole body trembling with the unexpressed terror she felt at the nameless threat

the "Imperial requisition" implied.

Spartak's heart lifted, though only briefly, when he saw what forces the Empire could still command. There might be a thousand vessels, he guessed, docked here at what huge illuminated signs still declared to be the Headquarters Port of the Third Imperial Fleet. Then he took a second look at those monstrous hulls, ranged like a forest of branchless metal trees across the concrete plain, and realized he had failed to make an obvious deduction.

The Empire, by all accounts, was struggling against decay and rebellion all through the galaxy. Why then were so many ships out of the sky at one place and one time? And he began to spot the clues which accounted for their presence: gashed hulls from distant battles, plating removed by the hundreds of square feet to expose the vital equipment within which was being cannibalized to maintain those ships still capable of flight.

Maybe somewhere out near the rim there was a world where ships stood like this in vast numbers, but not antiquated used to the limit by reckless commanders — new ships, human-made, ready to bring inwards to the hub those who for ten millennia had been harried away from the Argian domains and had bided their time on the threshold of intergalactic emptiness, waiting for the inevitable collapse.

If there were such a world, he thought, it would be worth hunting for.

The shadow of an idea crossed

his mind, and was dispelled immediately by the arrival alongside their own vessel of officials from the port controller's staff.

Vix vented his anger on them in a single blast of abuse and complaint. They ignored him as they might have ignored a breath of wind. Spartak, urging Vix aside, attempted to tackle them on a more rational basis, inquiring the authority for "Imperial requisition" and contesting the legality of giving orders to non-Imperial citizens.

The officials sighed and produced guns. It seemed that this had become the standard substitute for argument on Delcadore.

All three of them were taken — for Vineta refused to stay alone aboard the ship after her experience on Annanworld — to wait in a large, light anteroom outside the office of the port controller. There was no one else there apart from a man of early middle age, who to their horror lacked both a leg and an arm. They could not refrain from staring at him; on a world returning to barbarism after the withdrawal of Imperial support, such a sight might have been expected, but Delcadore was supposed to be an outpost of the still viable Argian civilization.

The man cracked a bitter smile as he saw their eyes covertly turning on his injuries.

"I'm not pretty any longer, am I?" he rasped. "Well, not to wonder at that! If you'd been picked out of an airless wreck the way I was, you'd have . . ." A fit of cough-

ing interrupted his angry words, and racked his body for a good minute before he could answer Spartak's tense questions.

"Oh, sure they'll fix me up sooner or later. But that can wait, they tell me. I'm the only survivor from my whole team, and all they want to know is where they went wrong. I'm going to tell 'em, too! Without mincing my words!"

"What happened?" Vix snapped.

"Fools — gas-brained fools! I could have told them . . ." The man's eyes unfocused, staring through the wall at a faraway disaster. "Hiring pirates, that's what they've hit on as their latest brain-wave! A whole Imperial fleet revolts under a commander who thinks he can do better than the mud-heads we have in charge at the moment. And who's to say he couldn't? Sometimes I think *I* could! And what do they do to combat this? They hire a ramshackle bunch of pirate ships, thinking to keep them from pillaging some Imperial planet this way, send out a command echelon to give the orders — that's where I got involved — and sit back and pour some more ancinarid. And what happens? Exactly what any schoolchild would have said! You can't give pirates orders, so they break and run. And the Imperial-trained rebels pick them off like scooting watersliders, and then the Imperials-that-were loot the very planet the pirates were aiming for, to make up for the inconvenience and minor losses they suffered!"

"Which fleet?" Vix demanded.

"The Eighteenth." The injured

man stared at him. "What other did you think it was?"

"What do you mean, 'what other?'" Vix countered. "The Twenty-Seventh is wiped out, as I well know. But it could have been the Tenth, or the Fortieth, or the Forty-Second, or —" He broke off, the other man's eyes burning at him.

"Are you sure?" the cripple whispered, after glancing around to make sure there was no one else in earshot.

"Of course. I've just come from Annanworld, before that I was at Batorya Dap, and before that Poowadya, and before that —"

"All these fleets are still operating? In revolt, but still operating?"

"At the last hearing, yes. Bar the Twenty-Seventh, as I mentioned."

"The liars," the cripple whispered. "The dirty, double-tongued, deceiving, damnable —"

"Vix of Asconel!" a speaker cried from the wall. "Go to the door which will open on your right. Bring your companions with you."

Puzzled at the cripple's reaction, Spartak lingered to put a final question to him, and got the answer he had half expected but was barely able to credit.

If a high-ranking officer of the cracked Third Imperial Fleet had been lied to about the fate of so many other fleets, lying must have become the general policy of the rump Empire.

How long could it stand on falsehood? He had envisaged another century or so before its prestige diminished to the point at which

rebels and outlaws were tempted clear down to the hub—ultimately perhaps to Argus itself.

But if they were already so desperate at the reduction of their loyalist forces that they were hiring pirates as mercenaries, the word would travel fast. And the next time the Empire would find pirates and rebels combined against it. There would be an end to futile shifts like trying to make the two enemies destroy each other.

Gloomy beyond description, he found he had followed Vix and Vineta into the adjacent office, and there confronted a podgy, gray-haired woman in a uniform encrusted with meaningless decorations and ostentatious badges of rank.

"Sit down," she said tonelessly. "Which of you is Vix, the alleged owner of the ship we've requisitioned?"

"Alleged!" Vix purpled again. "I have clear title —"

"I'm not arguing," the woman sighed. "If you want to go into legalisms, starships are by definition Imperial property and only leased to corporations, trading companies or — save the mark — individuals." Her mouth twisted as though in disgust. "But where would it get me to rely on a thin argument like that? I imagine you're competent to handle the ship, and if I wanted to commandeer it I'd have to pick someone equally skillful. And that's not easy because next thing you know he'd be headed for the great black yonder . . ."

Spartak found himself suddenly

pitying the woman, for she had defined herself instantly by what she had said: a weary official trying to keep things going while chaos battered at the structure of law, order and principle by which she had to be guided. He signalled Vix to be quiet, and leaned forward.

"May we know your authority?"

The woman blinked heavy lids at him. "Frankly, I'm not sure which capacity I'm acting in right now. I have so many jobs I sometimes lose track. I sit in this room as assistant immigration supervisor, Delcadore West/North Sector. I have the requisition on your ship as Acting Transport Director, Imperial space, Delcadore volume. And I'm under orders from the planetary government, department of public order."

"We have business here," Spartak said. "If we could know what you want our ship for, we could perhaps —"

"To the Big Dark with your business," the woman said. "I have a solution to one fiddling little problem out of about ten thousand waiting for me to deal with, and I'm not disposed to compromise."

"Now you listen to me!" Vix burst out. "First off, my ship is mine and I'm not handing it over to anyone who still has delusion of glory about the Empire! Second, my business here is important not only to me but to my home planet, and I'm not going to be cheated out of it. And thirdly —"

"Oh, shut up," the woman said. "Third is probably going to be something about not being an Imperial

citizen. You're an Imperial citizen if you were born on any planet which was ever part of the Empire, and Asconel was. Your Warden still holds his fief from Argus, and his spacefleet too."

"The blazes he does! The present Warden's a usurper, and he brought his fleet with him from some world called Brinze which the Imperial records don't show!"

"I wouldn't know," the woman shrugged. "Don't think I have time to keep up with what's happening on backwater planets like that, do you? What's left of the Empire generates enough problems to keep my attention fully occupied. So swallow this, and digest it at leisure."

"We have a girl here who can apparently read minds — a mutant, obviously. We could have let her be stoned to death, I guess. Things are nearly that bad already, even on Delcadore. But when we can, we cling to the Imperial rules, because they're better than anything else we have. And the Imperial rules say we keep the *status quo* by putting her out of the way on some habitable planet off towards the rim."

"In the old days we could have assigned her passage on regular liner-routes, under Imperial guard and protection to make sure some superstitious knot-head didn't assassinate her before she reached where she was sent. According to my best information—which I'll share with you since you're from way out anyway—there isn't a single commercial routing left which would get her to a rim system in less than a year. Co-

ordination has gone to hell, schedules aren't reliable, and pirates are picking off so much traffic the lines are closing down or flying only in armed convoy.

"So you'll have to do. I'm having this girl brought here from wherever the blazes she's been kept, and the moment she arrives you're going to take off and head for — what's the name of that place?" She pushed a stud on the arm of her chair and consulted a small screen set at an angle beside her. "Ah, yes — Nylock. I picked it because it's comparatively close: a straight-line route from here to the rim."

Vix was half out of his chair with rage. "You can't do this!" he thundered.

"Be grateful," the woman said stonily. "I could have sent you anywhere — out the far side of the Big Dark, come to that! Now do you fancy your chances with the pirates in that volume, hey? Used to take three Imperial battleships to get across there safely!"

Spartak, controlling himself better than Vix but nonetheless white-hot inside, forced out, "What right have you to make the requisition anyway?"

"Argian decree," the woman said. "If you want the number and text I'll get it for you, but it runs to seventy figures and two full recording crystals, and seeing it won't make a grain of difference. I don't care for your business on Delcadore, I don't care for your complaints and objections — all I care about is getting shut of one irritating problem."



She stabbed another stud on her chair-arm, and the doors of the room slid back.

"And don't think, either, that there's an easy way to avoid doing as you're told. Dumping the girl in space when you get out of our jurisdiction, for instance, and trying to sneak back here. You'll be welcome to conduct your business when you've finished ours. And to make sure you do —"

Soft footfalls sounded behind Spartak's chair, and he half-turned to see menacing uniformed figures there.

"We condition you," the woman said. "You won't be able to be comfortable or happy or sexually potent or even sleep properly from now on unless you're directing all your efforts to the completion of the mission on which you're sent."

## IX

The efficiency of the conditioning process was flawless: impersonal as a mechanical repair, thorough as the work of a first-rate surgeon.

Spartak, who knew something of this and related psychological techniques from his wide researches on Annanworld, had hoped to offer at least token resistance to the drugs and hypnotic instructions employed on him. But it was useless. As though a shutter had snapped down over his brain, he blanked out, and on re-awakening he found he could recall nothing of what had happened except at the two extreme levels of his awareness.

Consciously he knew he had been

conditioned. Subconsciously he was disturbed, as it were by an itch, that was already intense and would grow to be unbearable if he did not at once comply with the Imperial order.

He was appalled beyond measure. If this experience was anything to go by, it appeared that the chief tools of the Imperial power had been reduced to lies, propaganda and the threat of obliteration.

Small comfort, in view of that, to know that the galaxy now held forces too strong to be impressed by the last of those three instruments!

And perhaps worst of all was the fact that they were so confident of the reliability of the conditioning, they permitted him, Vix and Vineta to return to the ship without escort, knowing that until the telepathic girl was delivered to them they would sit and wait, and once she arrived they would helplessly depart for Nylock, the only place in the galaxy where they could be sure of release from the imprinted command.

"Is there nothing we can do?" Vix pleaded for the tenth time. His courage in regular combat, his habitual assertive self-confidence, availed him not at all when faced by a weapon as subtle as this conditioning. It had perhaps been an inspiration on the part of the gray-haired woman to cite sexual impotence as one of the consequences of failing to comply with her decree; in any case, Spartak was reminded of a theory he had once formed about this redhaired half-brother of his. His insatiable demand for women, the theory proposed, was a way of

compensating for the fact that he was youngest of three brothers, much alike. He needed women's attention to reassure him about his own individuality.

For a long moment Spartak didn't reply. All he would have said would have amounted to the same as he had already repeated over and over. He knew of nothing that could be done without psychological assistance as skilled as what the Empire could draw on, and it couldn't be obtained without putting the ship into space for some other friendlier world. And once in space, the compulsion would be far too strong to withstand.

The pause gave Vix a chance to think of something else: Vineta was weeping silently in the corner of the control room, her face pale and drained of hope. Vix rounded on her.

"Stop that snivelling, woman!" he blazed. "I can't do anything about what's happened, can I? Control yourself and stop crying as if I'd been beating you!"

"Vix!" Spartak snapped. "You ought to stop taking your frustration out on the poor girl! It can't make much difference to her where you drag her away to. Nylock and Asconel are both meaningless noises to her. If she's in tears it's for your sake, not her own."

The cloud of gloom lifted momentarily from Vineta's perfectly shaped features, and she found the energy for a sad smile of gratitude at the intervention. Beside himself, Vix retorted, "I suppose you're glad of this, are you? Glad we're being

sent to some back-of-beyond planet instead of to Asconel where we belong! There's fighting there — or will be — and you have no stomach for it!"

Spartak clung grimly to the shreds of his own temper. The abstract principles inculcated in him on Annanworld, though, were very hard to apply under present circumstances.

"How long did you spend burrowing in your piles of stale knowledge?" Vix sneered. "Ten years, isn't it? And does nothing you learned in all that time tell you how —"

He was interrupted by a bang on the outer door of the lock. Hardly stopping to draw breath, he charged away on a new line of complaint: "Now our time's up! They've brought this telepathic mutant along and the moment she's aboard we've lost our last chance to figure out a way of staying on Delcadore and tracking down Tiorin!"

The idea struck Spartak that having a mind-reader close to him frightened Vix as much as being sent far away from Asconel. Superstition, merely? Or the fear of having some secret misdeed revealed? For himself, he knew he would welcome thin consolation in this opportunity to find out the truth behind all the rumors which he had heard; the policy of deportation which the Empire had instituted to insure itself against wild factors in the peoples it ruled by imposing statistical averages on them had worked well, but it had also fed the imaginations of the ignorant.

Still, right now the matter of the talents of the sports the human race had thrown up was irrelevant. He got to his feet.

Somehow he wasn't so sure as Vix that the mutant girl was waiting at the entrance. He would have expected a call from the port controller and perhaps some triggering command to reinforce the conditioning on their minds, not a simple knock without advance warning.

He unlocked the panel and slid it aside.

The person who met his gaze was a little man, apparently very nervous, with protruding teeth and wide startled eyes. He held tight to the guardrail around the narrow platform to which the ladder below him gave access, as though he was afraid of losing his balance and crashing to the ground.

He said in a squeaky, eager voice, "Is this the ship from Asconel?"

Spartak nodded, and the nervous man was infinitely relieved, even going so far as to take one hand from the rail he clutched.

"Please! May I come inside and discuss a proposition with you?"

Spartak hesitated, then stepped back and gestured that the other should pass him. Vix, from within the control room, called out fiercely to know what was going on.

But the nervous man would not say anything further until he was safely in the control room himself. Then he drew himself up importantly.

"My name is not of any consequence," he commenced. "It is in fact Rochard, but I am representing

a — uh — a third party who is very desirous of securing passage to your planet. For some time he has had his agents making inquiries at all the spaceports on Delcadore, asking about ships from Asconel and nearby systems, offering a generous fee for a flight thither. Yours is the first such ship to come to my notice since I was requested to assist him."

Vix and Spartak exchanged astonished glances. Then the redhead pursed his lips as if to spit.

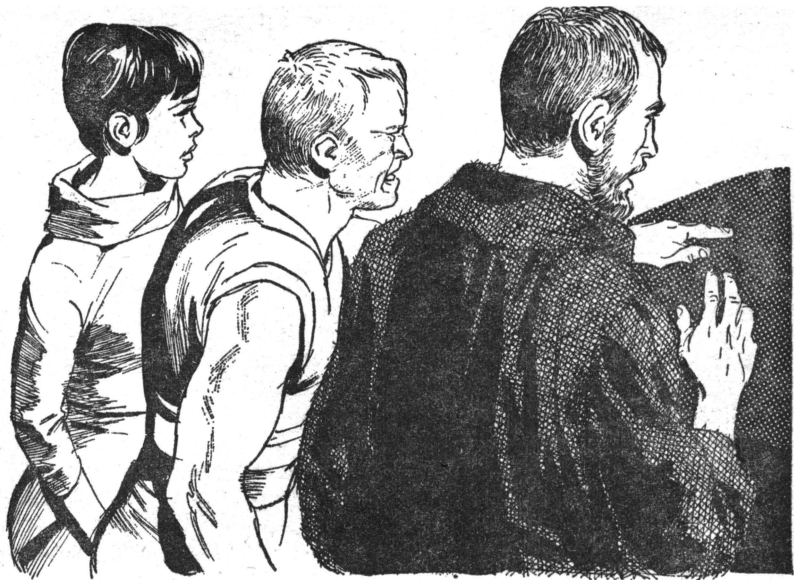
"Can't help him," he snarled.

Rochard put his hand suggestively into his belt-pouch, and there was the mellow jingling noise of solid Imperial coin. He said, "I'm instructed to make a very liberal payment in advance, and then my — uh — principal will guarantee double the old commercial rate for the distance. You'd be well advised to — "

"It's nothing to do with money," Vix broke in. His shoulders bowed, and he turned half away from Rochard. "Go look for some other vessel. If I could, I'd cheerfully take him to Asconel and not ask one circle for the flight — that miserable world needs outsiders to visit it and view its present plight! But it's out of the question."

**B**ewildered, Rochard renewed his original offer, his wide alarmed eyes seeking a clue to the refusal. Abruptly Vix whirled and clamped a hand on his wrist.

"Out! Or I'll throw you out. You can't take no for an answer, can you? I guess you're losing a fat bonus for finding us, hey? Well, have your



argument with the woman who sits in the port control building yonder!" He added a vivid and obscene description of her.

"Just a second," Spartak whispered. His mind had been buzzing ever since Rochard's entrance with a wild — fantastic — notion. Even now he was reluctant to utter it, but he felt he must.

"This 'principal' of yours — he isn't by some miracle a man called Tiorin of Asconel?"

Rochard started. "Why, you know him!" he blurted. "How do you know him? I was forbidden to name him to anyone."

"Don't you see a resemblance between him and this man who holds your arm?" Spartak rapped. The success of his million-to-one probe had shaken him, physically, so that

he was now trembling with excitement. As for Vix, he was so startled he had completely forgotten to release his hold on Rochard.

"Why — I guess so. But there are many worlds where one genetic strain has dominated others and produced a general likeness between many people."

"This is no accidental resemblance. You're looking at his full brother Vix. And I'm Spartak, his half-brother."

"Amazing!" Rochard breathed. "Why, for this he'll pay me double — treble — ten times what he promised! Please let me go," he added cringingly to Vix. "I must carry the news to him at once."

"It still won't help much," Spartak grunted, silencing a threatened interruption from Vix with a



lift of his eyebrows. "We've been put under Imperial requisition, and conditioned to take a mutant girl to some place called Nylock. You must be well in touch with what goes on around here. What can we do to get out from under this?"

Rochard's face fell. He said, "Oh, no . . ." The two words were like the sighing of wind through bushes in a cemetery.

"Is there someone we can bribe to have the conditioning reversed?" Spartak urged. "Is there anyone we could go to for counter-conditioning?"

"How about Tiorin himself?" Vix snapped. "What's his situation here? How's he fixed for contacts, government influence, things like that?"

Rochard spoke so rapidly he was almost babbling, his gaze apparently

riveted on the imaginary spectacle of a fat reward disappearing into space. "Your brother is in no position to help you either! He's not meant to be on Delcadore at all. You see, some short time ago there came a man from — I think — his own world, yours too of course, an assassin, from whom he barely escaped. Since then he's been in hiding, and only some few trusted agents have been told he's still here. For the sake of any more would-be killers, the news was passed that he had left for Argus to raise aid against the new rulers of Asconel."

"Do you know where he is? Can you contact him quickly?" Spartak demanded.

"Why, within minutes if he's at the usual place. But it may take a while to bring him to you. If you're

under Imperial requisition you can't leave the ship, and any attempt you make to communicate with people on the planet will be automatically jammed."

"Get hold of him at once anyway," Spartak ordered. "It's our only chance."

Frantically Rochard dashed for the door.

Spartak turned to Vix, wiping sweat from his face. He said, "It might have taken weeks to track him down here. He might have fooled us, along with Bucyon's assassins, and we'd have gone on a ridiculous chase to Argus looking for him. Even if we have to go home via Nylock, we may prove to have wasted amazingly little time."

"If we get back from Nylock," Vix said. "If we get him aboard in time to make the trip with us, and the girl isn't brought here before he arrives. If. If. If!"

"I should have given Rochard a message to cover that risk," Spartak whispered. "Told Tiorin to wait for us, and we'd be back to locate him right here."

"You were not expecting to find your brother on this world at all," Vineta suggested unexpectedly. "You were prepared to find he had left for somewhere else."

Spartak nodded absently.

"Then you are in luck," she said with a shrug. "Try to look on that side of it. I will go fix refreshments against your brother's arrival."

She slipped silently from the cabin, and the two men settled down to try and abide by her extremely sensible advice.

It seemed that a slow eternity passed before they again heard a bang on the outer door. Vix leapt to his feet.

"That *must* be the girl being brought!" he declared. "And we *still* haven't heard from Tiorin!" he added nervously.

"I don't think so," Spartak countered, and now voiced the thought which had occurred to him earlier: that the port authorities would certainly advise them of the girl's arrival by communicator. He went to open the lock, and found Rochard had returned.

"I wouldn't have been so long," the nervous man exclaimed, "but I thought it safer to try and reach you by communicator rather than come back. Only once you're under Imperial requisition even the palms I can normally grease seem to be put back in their pockets. To the point, since I did have to come here again: your brother is on his way, and if you can delay your departure one more hour he'll join you. Uh — I can't help wondering," he finished in a fawning tone, "whether I may not have done you too some small service . . .?"

Spartak had been isolated in the environment of his order on An-nanworld for so long that at first he did not get the point of this delicate probe for a gratuity. When he did, he found he was ignorant of the current purchasing power of Imperial money. He fumbled a twenty-circle piece from his pouch, and that seemed to satisfy Rochard;

at any rate, he gave a mechanical smile and scampered down the ladder again.

"I wonder who he is," Spartak murmured to Vix when he had relayed Rochard's news.

"Him?" Vix shrugged. "He's of a type which I've seen spring up on a dozen worlds. Carrion worms infesting the gangrened body of the old Empire. Probably he's regretting this instant that we're not doing anything which would entitle him to a reward if he informed on us to the port authorities. That's how people like him make a living: buying and selling information for use in blackmail, law evasion and petty crime in general."

"I thought he was a frightened fool when I first saw him," Spartak admitted. "But he must be pretty astute."

"Astute? Him? He didn't even try to find out if we were from Bucyon, like the assassin he told us about who came after Tiorin. He might have sold out his best employer and seen his throat cut without reward to himself."

Spartak was briefly silent. Then he mentioned his unfamiliarity with the purchasing power of money nowadays, and added ruefully, "I think I've been too long away from real life, Vix!"

"I could have been put away from it permanently, but for quick thinking on your part," Vix retorted in a gruff tone. "At least we know we need only delay another hour, now. I hope they're having trouble locating this mutant girl and bringing her to us."

But barely half the hoped-for period had gone by when the communicator barked at them.

"Vix of Asconel, come to the port control building. Your passenger under requisition is here."

Vix and Spartak exchanged glances that promised determination to resist, and sat tight, their mouths clamped shut on the temptation to answer and comply.

After a second peremptory order, however, there was a noise from below, and Vix jumped up.

"Vineta!" he exclaimed. "The conditioning is on her too, isn't it?"

Spartak nodded. "Is she trying to get out of the lock?"

"No, it doesn't sound like it." Vix went to the door to peer out. "No, she's coming here!"

The girl's face was pearly with sweat, and her teeth were chattering. "Vix, you must shut me in the cabin!" she forced out. "Or else I cannot stay against the orders I can hear!"

"Hear?" Vix rapped.

She nodded. "Like a little voice in my own head, whispering all the time."

"It's a good idea to lock her in," Spartak confirmed. "I wish there was some way we could lock all of us in. Is there?"

"Not that I know of," Vix grunted. "Sooner or later, even if we closed everything fast, we'd be driven to operating the emergency escape hatches, which can't be locked."

He did as Vineta had asked, and on his return put a question to Spartak. "Little voices inside the head—is that how it feels to you?"

Spartak shook his head. He answered loudly as another, now puzzled, command came over the communicator, trying to drown out the words with his own. "It affects different people different ways, I'm told. It gives me a helpless tightness in the guts, makes my mouth dry and I think eventually it will blur my vision."

"How long before it gets unbearable?"

"I don't know. How strong are we?"

But the authorities' patience was shorter than their endurance. With ten minutes still to go before the promised time of Tiorin's arrival, there came a thunderous banging on the lock door, entirely different from Rochard's timid knock.

"Tiorin?" whispered Vix, whose neck was now corded with tension as he struggled against the invisible compulsion to leave the ship and fetch their unwanted passenger.

"I guess it could be," Spartak replied with difficulty. "I'd better go see. I think I know more about what's been done to us than you do. I stand a marginally better chance of arguing for a while longer if it's not Tiorin down there."

"Go ahead," Vix consented, and his face twisted with self-contempt at his own frailty.

It was not Tiorin. It was the pudgy woman with gray hair, accompanied by a squad of uniformed guards and the mutant girl — presumably — laid out on a stretcher on the back of the groundcar in which they had all ridden over to the ship.

"You there!" she roared at Spartak's appearance. "If you fight our conditioning much longer, you won't be in a state to fly space! If that's how you think you're going to evade my orders, I tell you straight you won't get away with it! I'll condition one of my own pilots and drag you out to jail, and Delcadore will be the only planet you see for the rest of your lives!"

A cloud of formless terror due to the conditioning enveloped Spartak's brain. He was unable to speak. Ignoring him, the woman turned to the guards with her.

"Get that girl off the car and put her aboard!"

Slowly, the terror retreated as Spartak called on every trick of self-discipline taught him on Annanworld. He found his voice again, could see clearly as the guards awkwardly sought to get the girl-laden stretcher up the ladder to the lock at which he stood.

A shocking possibility crossed his mind, and everything else, conditioning included, fled from his awareness.

He leaned forward on the rail, peering down at the girl. From her face, and the slightness of the body under the blanket in which she was wrapped, he deduced that she was scarcely more than a child — fifteen or sixteen, perhaps.

But that wasn't what transfixed him. He had assumed her to be unconscious, perhaps injured by the peasants or whoever had tried to stone her to death. The gray-haired woman had mentioned something about that. However, he had seen



without a shadow of doubt that her eyes were open.

"What's wrong with that girl?"

The guards, busy trying to get her up the ladder, didn't answer. The woman on the car merely scowled.

Behind him in the lock, Vix appeared, clutching his gun but somehow unable to find the trigger, so that his hands wandered absurdly over the stock and barrel, like jointed insects with minds of their own.

"Is she sick, or hurt?" he inquired feverishly.

"I don't think so," Spartak rapped.

"Get back!" — from one of the guards manhandling the stretcher up to them. Despite himself, Vix obeyed instantly. Spartak heard him cursing under his breath.

The stretcher grated over the edge of the platform and was slammed flat. Blue eyes in a face which would normally have been ruddy and healthy, but had turned sallow, stared at the sky, not even turning to see into whose care she had been committed.

"Catatone!" Spartak thundered, and rage so great it overcame the force of the conditioning stormed into his limbs.

"What did you say?" Vix cried.

"She's under catatone! It's a paralyzant — they first got it from the poison of the Louder ichneu-mon." He stamped to the guardrail and stared down at the gray-haired woman.

"Correct!" she applauded mockingly.

Vix plucked at his arm. "Isn't it as well?" he whispered. "After all, to have her —"

Spartak brushed aside the other's hand. "It's the cruellest thing in the galaxy!" he blazed. "Because it *only* paralyzes! It doesn't dull pain! How'd you like to be unable even to moisten your eyes by blinking — or move to relieve a cramped leg — or control your bowels?"

He heard Vix draw his breath in sharply, and from the corner of his eye saw that the redhead was staring with dismay at the girl's taut body.

"And don't you know why they did it?" Spartak raged on. "Because there's so much lying and deceit going on in this once-proud Empire they're afraid a mind-reader could tell a few unpleasant truths to the people they're duping — like the man we met earlier, shy of his arm and his leg!"

He saw, as clearly as through a telescope, that his taunt had made the gray-haired woman wince. Without conscious intent, he shot out his arm and seized the energy gun from Vix's fumbling grasp. Trying desperately to stretch this moment of not-thinking to its utmost, he levelled the weapon and found the trigger.

"Where's the antidote?" he shouted. "Get me the antidote or I'll burn you where you sit!"

There was a dreadful silence. Incredible, the guards turned at the foot of the ladder and stared up at him, shaking with the effort of keeping the gun sighted on the gray-haired woman, but somehow finding the resources to go on.

"We — we haven't got it!" the woman quavered.

"Then get it!" Spartak told her. "No, not you! You're my hostage. Send one of these bullyboys for it. And tell him to run both ways!"

Vix put his hands on the guard-rail, clamping them till the knuckles were white. Seeming to draw strength from his brother's example, he cried, "And tell that man below not to pull any tricks — I saw him move for his sidearm!"

The guard who had tried to get at his gun jerked his hand back from his waist, holding it out at his side.

"Hurry!" Spartak rasped. "Your conditioning is good. I might decide I have to give in — but I'll burn you first!"

The woman shrieked terrified orders, and the guards broke as one to dash back to the port control building and fetch what was required.

The time that passed now was hardly human-scaled, inside Spartak's overstrained mind. It was time slow enough to suit the growth of galaxies, the cooling of suns. Yet there was nothing in all of space except a frightened fat woman on a ridiculous little groundcar, trembling as the gun stayed aligned with her head.

Could he endure? His guts were chilled with nausea; his vision was swimming and there were random, insane noises in his ears. The metal of the gun seemed alternately burning hot and freezing cold, and often he had the illusion that — like Vix — he was not gripping the trigger, but fumbling in front of and behind it.

"There he comes!" Vix said. He pointed, but Spartak dared not look away from the sole focus of his attention.

"Let him bring it up," he breathed. "Put it alongside the girl's head." -

"Bring what up?" Vix glanced at him in wonder and not a little admiration. "Oh! Not the guard coming back — but Tiorin! I can see his red hair plainly!"

"I don't care about Tiorin," Spartak said. A vague puzzlement flashed across his mind; he did care really, didn't he? Only somehow it was less important than the main purpose, the bringing of the antidote for catatone . . .

"Spartak, listen to me," Vix was saying out of infinite distance. "Spartak, Tiorin is here — he's come up to the lock and brought the antidote with him. I told the guard to give it to him and here he is and he's brought it. You can put down the gun and we can leave."

Spartak's temporary universe, containing only himself, the gun and its target, crumbled, and utter darkness overwhelmed him.

## XI

Two blurred faces topped with red hair swam in Spartak's unfocused vision. He struggled to bring the images into register with one another. The effort made his eyes hurt. He gave up, and only then discovered that there were two faces in reality, not merely in his imagination. One of them belonged to Vix. But the other —

Of course. Tiorin! Memory came flooding back, and he was able to force himself up on his elbows. He was lying on one of the bunks in the upper cabin, and both his brothers were leaning over him with expressions of concern.

"Spartak?" Tiorin said doubtfully. "How do you feel?"

Thoughtfully Spartak took stock of his body and still more of his bruised mind. He said eventually, "Bad. But I'll survive."

"By the moons of Argus, it's a miracle," Vix declared. "I shall never know till my dying day how you managed to keep that gun on its target. I had something like that in mind, but I couldn't control my hands under the conditioning."

"They're alleged to know a good many things on Annanworld which have been forgotten elsewhere in the galaxy," Tiorin said. "Where's that jug of broth your girl brought? Oh, there. Give some of it to Spartak — it'll help to restore his strength."

Vix carefully set the spout of the jug to Spartak's lips, his other arm serving as a prop behind the younger man's shoulders. Spartak sipped and sipped again; the broth was hot and spicy, and he thought he detected the faint flavor of some energy concentrate under the masking tastes.

Meantime, he had a chance to look at Tiorin, whom he had not seen since the day of Hodat's accession to the Warden's chair.

His second brother had aged noticeably. He would in fact be — Spartak calculated rapidly — forty-one, which in the heyday of galac-

tic civilization had been youth, not early middle age. But the extreme wealth of the Empire was needed to support freely available geriatric treatment. Now, and for the foreseeable future, only those fortunate enough to inhabit secure planets like Annanworld would enjoy the old benefits. He had a passing vision of peasants grubbing on decadent worlds, mating in their teens, the women worn out by childbirth at age thirty. It was not a pleasant idea, and Spartak spoke hostilely to distract his mind.

"Tiorin, it's incredible that we should have located you!"

"Not really." Even Tiorin's voice had changed from what Spartak recalled: grown deeper and become colored with a sort of drawl to suggest that he weighed every single word. "I've been explaining to Vix how it happened. Right now, he tells me, you're feeling very annoyed at the pretensions of the rump of the Empire. But it saved my life by still possessing some of the old advantages — an efficient law-force, swift communications . . . It was no secret that I was second son to the former Warden of Asconel, you see. I'd found it helpful to draw on the small prestige this conferred. And when Bucyon's assassin arrived, and started asking rather too freely where he could find me, some inspired official grew alarmed. He sent a warning to me, and we laid a trap for the would-be killer. It was from him that I learned about this hellish cult Bucyon has imported, and also of course about the death of our brother Hodat."

A shadow crossed his prematurely lined face.

"Accordingly, I had it noised about that I'd gone to beg Imperial aid in the deposition of the usurper at the court of Argus."

"I still don't see why you didn't," Vix muttered.

"You of all people should know," Tiorin retorted. "Holding what it has is beyond the Empire's power now. Whole fleets are rebelling and setting up on their own. What chance would I have had of securing aid except on terms that would be ruinous to Asconel? Do you know what price the old Twenty-Seventh Fleet set for their return to Imperial jurisdiction? You, Spartak?" On receiving headshakes, he concluded, "The free right to sack the planet Norge!"

Spartak, shocked beyond measure, pushed aside the empty jug of broth. "But Norge was one of the last Imperial outposts beyond Delcadore!"

"Still is. The price was refused. But the point is: the price was set. I'd have had to promise something similar in respect of Asconel, and I wouldn't have had the heart." Tiorin scowled. "No, it seemed to me that my only hope was to exploit my inborn capital as Hodat's legal heir. That's why I hired agents to inform me of the arrival of any ship from Asconel. I was afraid the most likely occupants of such a ship would be more assassins, out to complete the job I'd once frustrated, but by good luck yours was the first vessel to reach Delcadore."

"You're relying on your appeal to the citizens to make them rise up in support of you against Bucyon?" Spartak suggested.

"So are you, I gather," Tiorin countered.

Spartak shook his head heavily. He said, "I talked with Korisu, the man Bucyon sent to murder Vix — and of course myself as well if possible. My judgment is that if Bucyon has contrived to turn a once-loyal citizen of Asconel into a fanatic supporter of his regime and his cult, it's going to take more than simply fomenting a counter-revolution to set our planet free."

There was a depressed pause. Vix broke it with his habitual intolerance of extended silence. "We're going to have all the time in the galaxy to work out our plans," he grunted. "Once you dropped that gun and keeled over, Spartak, the conditioning took hold on me, and I had — *had* — to get to the controls and set our course for this planet Nylock. And we're well on the way there now."

"The girl!" Spartak said, and swung his feet to the floor. "Did you give her the antidote?"

"We thought we'd better not," Tiorin admitted. "Obviously you knew something about medicine in general and catatone in particular, and I'm afraid I've learned little about anything in the years we've been apart. I've gone on indulging myself."

"Wise of you, I guess, but . . ." Spartak stood up, swaying, and had to close his eyes briefly as empathic agony stabbed him at the thought of

the torment the mutant girl was undergoing. "Where is she?"

"I told Vineta to make her comfortable in the other cabin," Vix muttered.

Spartak hesitated. Then he spoke his mind, as his training on Annan-world had accustomed him to do. "Listen, Vix! It's painfully obvious that you hate the idea of having a mind-reader aboard. I guess you'd rather leave her the way the Empire liked to have her — incapable of speech, so she can't give away any secrets she picks up. But mutant or not she's a human being, and sheer chance decreed that she should be gifted with abnormal talents rather than you or I or Tiorin. If she's survived into her teens, she's bound to have learned discretion and foresight. She won't blab the things you want to keep private."

"I hope not," Vix shrugged. But he seemed ashamed of himself, and turned away without comment.

"Here's the phial of antidote," Tiorin said, fumbling in his belt-pouch. "I hope it's the real stuff, not some fake they palmed off on us to make us leave the planet."

"We'll soon find out," Spartak answered grimly.

Vineta looked up, startled, as he entered the lower cabin, then gave him one of her quick shy smiles. He nodded in response before dropping to his knees alongside the mutant girl and reaching for his medical case.

"She doesn't move at all!" Vineta exclaimed. "She is alive, isn't she? But how does she breathe?"

It was an astute question. Not for the first time Spartak found himself suspecting that this self-effacing girl was the exact opposite of Vix: where he talked much and thought rather too little, she probably thought a great deal despite speaking very seldom.

"You haven't looked under this covering?" he suggested.

Vineta nodded. "She's clothed in some thick garment. I couldn't see how it fastened, so I left it."

Spartak drew the blanket aside. The girl's body was revealed completely enclosed in a suit that glistened as if wet. A bulging hump showed across her bosom; another made her belly rise as though she were pregnant.

"Yes, I've seen that technique before," he said — more to himself than Vineta. "Turn her head on the side, please. I shall have to put the antidote into the neck arteries; if I take the suit off she'll suffocate before I save her."

*If Tiorin's ghastly suspicion is correct, she'll die anyway . . .* But he drove down that thought and administered the antidote with deft fingers.

Seconds dragged away like hours — and she moved.

Spartak realized he had been holding his breath; he exhaled gustily. "Now we must get the suit off, quickly. See, it fastens on the shoulders and at the hips. Open that side."

With a sucking noise the wet-looking material let go. The skin revealed was pallid and unhealthy, somewhat swollen with accumulated fluids.

"That's how she breathed — see?" he explained, as the mound on her bosom was exposed, and proved to be a machine in a metal casing. "That drives air in and out and acts as a pacemaker for her heart. And this —" the similar device on her belly — "takes care of bodily wastes. But not very well."

Now the mutant girl had sufficiently recovered for an expression to come to her face, and at the sight of it Vineta could not stifle an exclamation of horror. It was the worst look of pain Spartak had even seen.

"Can you do massage?" he demanded, stacking the prosthetic machines all anyhow on a handy shelf. "Space knows how long she's been kept from moving—the return of normal sensation will be pure torture!"

Vineta's hands flew to the pale stiff limbs and began to rub.

"Thank you." The words came on breath alone, barely audible. "Thank you. You can stop now. The pain's gone."

Spartak sat back, exhausted, and stared at the girl. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure." A sharp tongue slipped out to moisten her lips, which were chapped. "You are Spartak, yes? And you are Vineta?"

Spartak's eyebrows drew together. So far as he could recall, he hadn't addressed Vineta by name, nor been addressed, since entering the cabin. He said, "Did you read our names from our minds?"

A smile came and went on the mutant girl's face. She said, a trifle

louder as her vocal cords came under control, "Yes. And it feels very good. I have felt so much fear in people who knew what I am, but in your mind I feel—what to call it? Curiosity, I think. And in hers much kindness. I am so glad to be here."

"Then you also know what's going to happen to you?" Spartak suggested.

"Yes. And I see why you ask. Frankly, I don't care where I go so long as it's away from—from the past." The small sharp-featured face clouded.

"I'll let you rest now," Spartak said. "Vineta, perhaps you should bring her some of that broth you made for me. It seems to have brought about my recovery from shock very quickly." A point struck him, and went unvoiced by deliberate decision as his eyes returned to the mutant girl.

She gave a thin chuckle. "My name's Eunora," she said. "You have a clear mind, Spartak. It's like looking into a deep transparent pool of pure water, and I can see all the way to the rocks at the bottom except in one place. And that's where you've been conditioned to take me to Nylock."

"I imagine," Spartak said with difficulty, "that you can make allowances for my brothers. I don't think they feel as I do about—about people like you."

"No, I can sense them. Just barely." Eunora shut her eyes and seemed to be listening to distant noises. "They are both full of resentment. The conditioning lies on

all their thoughts like dense fog, and one of them can't help thinking that I'm responsible for the delay in your mission."

After that, silence. Spartak caught Vineta's eye and nodded her out of the cabin. Then he went, heavy-hearted to rejoin his brothers.

## XII

The two others had gone up to the control room again. As he approached the door, he heard Vix's voice raised.

"Well, I know Spartak's views on this, because he told me."

"And they are—?" Tiorin prompted.

"That we might have spent months hunting you, maybe going clear to Argus on the false trail you laid, so we should be glad our only delay is this little side trip to Nylock."

"Suitably philosophical, I guess," Tiorin replied as Spartak paused outside the door, "for someone who took vows to an order on Annanworld. It's a hotbed of philosophy, I'm told. For my part, I agree with you. If luck runs your way you ought to grab its tail and hang on tight! Is there no means whereby we could get around the conditioning imposed on you? I'm not conditioned. Could you give me a course of instruction and let me fly the ship to Asconel?"

"No, for two reasons." Spartak slid the door aside and stepped into their view. "First, conditioning of this order of efficiency turns your own mind against your wishes. If

Vix were to try and teach you how to pilot the ship, he'd so instruct you as to insure that you set course for where we're commanded to go. Or, if by some miracle he avoided that trap, he and I and probably Vineta would conspire to take the controls away from you again. And secondly, even if you did succeed in getting us to Asconel, we'd arrive there in the sort of state I was in when they finally brought the antidote for Eunora. Only worse. The strain might literally kill us; I'd certainly expect us to be incurably insane."

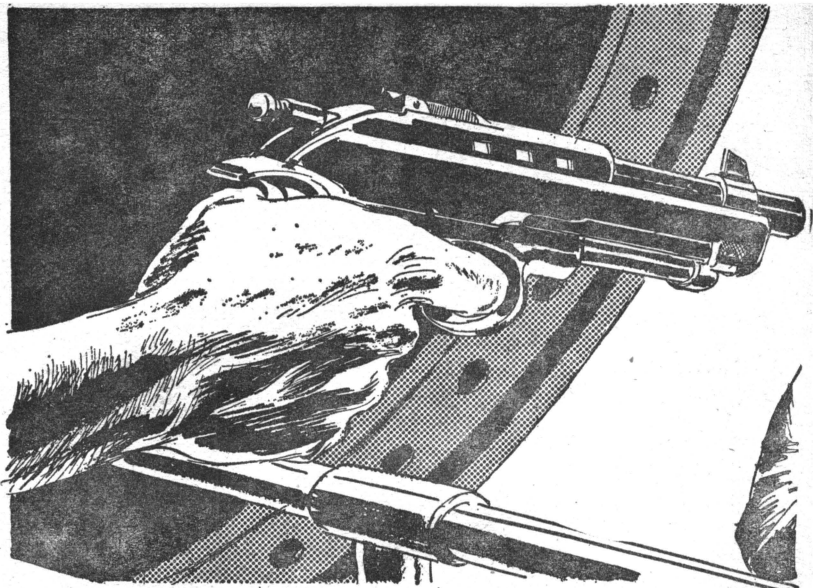
"The girl!" Reminded of his other omnipresent anxiety, Vix tensed. "Did you—uh—cure her?"

"And what was the name you used?" Tiorin added.

"Eunora." Spartak combed at his beard with agitated fingers. "I guess you could say she's cured. She's released from the paralysis, at least. But I'm astonished at how normal and level-headed she seems. It's not what you'd expect from someone of her age—still very young—treated in such an abominable fashion." He paused and frowned. "Oh—maybe I'm being overly suspicious. Maybe she's just so glad to get free of the Imperials and the people who were apt to stone her . . ."

"Is that what they were going to do?" Tiorin exclaimed.

"So we were told by that fat old fool at the spaceport on Delcadore," Vix confirmed. "Well, we have to make the most of our chances such as they are. Spartak, when you came in we were discussing how to tackle the problem.



Tiorin has unconfirmed reports of a center of resistance established by Tigrid Zen on Gwo.”

“How old are the reports?” Spartak asked sourly. “Gwo is too close and too obvious for Bucyon to overlook it.” He had been taken to Gwo once, and never forgotten the impression it made on him; marginally habitable, it served Asconel and five or six neighboring systems as a source of raw materials, the far greater distance for transport as compared with asteroids in their own systems being counterbalanced by the extra convenience of working with breathable atmosphere. It was a bleak, oppressive world, its vegetation drab olive and gray, its climate wet and windy, its oceans perpetually tossed by storms.

The point apparently hadn't oc-

curred to Vix. He glanced at Tiorin. “Is this something you had from Bucyon's assassin?”

Tiorin nodded. “But I did confirm the story by checking with the crews of ships that had recently passed within earshot, so to speak, of Asconel. There's a spaceman's slang term for that; what is it?”

“Rumor-range,” Spartak answered shortly. “Four kinds of news: standing there, landing there, rumor-range and rubbish.”

Vix gave a humorless chuckle. “I'm surprised at you knowing that, not ever having been a spaceman yourself.”

Spartak made a gesture of dismissal, dropping into a seat. “Speaking of Bucyon's assassin reminded me. Your tracks may be fairly well covered on Delcadore, Tiorin — though





after meeting Rochard, I'm not so sure of that. Ours certainly are not. The most casual inquiry on Annanworld would give a lead of Vix and me. And Bucyon is hardly likely to rest content with the triple frustration of his attempts at wiping us out. Indeed, I'm amazed he relied on lone agents. In his position, I'd stop at nothing to get rid of all of us."

Tiorin nodded, his face grave. "The impression I had from the interrogation of the man sent to kill me was that fanatics deluded by the cult of Belizuek acquire the illusion of being invincible, capable of undertaking any mission singlehanded. But I grant that this isn't an impression apt to survive a succession of setbacks like the ones luck has brought us up to now."

"Fanatics are tricky to handle,"

Spartak muttered. "If you catch them on their blind side—say by doing something they define as impossible—you can cope with them easily. If you stand in their way as we must stand in Bucyon's . . . Or do we?"

"What do you mean?" Vix snapped. Then a light seemed to dawn on him. "Oh! Do you mean that this errand to dump the mutant girl is something of Bucyon's doing?"

"A means of getting us out of the way? I doubt it. Even Bucyon could hardly organize a chain of coincidences like that. No, what I mean is this: if he's managed to inspire dupes like Korisu and the man sent to kill Tiorin, if he's reduced the citizens to a state of blind adoration, he may feel secure without disposing

of us. He may wait for us to come home, frantic with rage, and then pick us off at his own convenience."

Vix's face darkened. "By the moons of Argus, I'd like to test that idea! I'd like to set course now for Asconel and pitch Bucyon and his woman Lydis from the top of the Dragon's Fangs—*ach!*"

The last sound was not a word, but a gasp of agony, and he doubled over. Alarmed, Spartak jolted up from his seat, but Vix waved him back.

"Second time that's happened," the redhead wheezed. "If I so much as think about going straight to Asconel, I get a griping in the guts, but if I speak it out loud, it's like molten metal being poured into my belly."

"It's the conditioning," Tiorin said. "It must be."

Spartak nodded. "Think about Nylock," he urged Vix. "Think about going to Asconel after we've left the mutant girl behind. It'll calm you and you'll be eased."

"Go on talking on those lines," Vix whispered. The whole of his face had paled to the whiteness of his long scar.

"Uh—yes." Spartak turned to Tiorin. "Well, the simple plan is to link up with the rebels. If any. As a starter."

Tiorin scowled. "We have the mystique of our blood to draw support, descended as we are from the Warden who steered Asconel through the storms which followed the collapse of Argian influence in our sector of the galaxy. That might tip the

scales in our favor. But after ourselves, I know no one more likely to rally resistance to Bucyon than Tigrid Zen, and if he's failed . . ." He shrugged despondently.

"We're guessing," Spartak said angrily. "What we need to do is make straight for Asconel — contact Tigrid Zen if we can, but not chasing him if he's gone hunting support in some other system. Then on Asconel, perhaps disguised, we ought to —"

He broke off. Tiorin was gazing at him queerly.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"You just said 'make straight for Asconel,'" Tiorin exclaimed. "And nothing happened to you! When Vix said the same thing, more or less, he doubled up in pain."

Blank, Spartak tried it again. "We should make straight for Asconel. I want to go straight there now. *I intend to go straight there now.*"

He jumped to his feet. "By the moons of Argus, you're right! Vix, try it!"

"I—!" Vix moistened his lips and gathered his courage, fearing another blast of the torture which had overcome him moments earlier. "I want to go to Asconel. Now."

And slowly a smile replaced his look of anxiety.

"The conditioning's failed!" Tiorin exploded. "It must have been badly implanted—"

"No!" Spartak rapped. "I felt it, and believe me. I *know*. The psychologists who treated us knew their job. Either we're suffering from a delusion, implanted as a second line of defense against the break-

down of the main commands, or— No, that can't be right. We have you as a control, Tiorin; you're not conditioned, and you'd observe that. Then that leaves one single possibility, and I think I know what it is."

"Tell us!" cried Vix, almost beside himself with joy at being unexpectedly released from his invisible bonds.

"Eunora," Spartak said.

"What? The mind-reading girl?"

Vix took half a pace back as though recoiling from a physical shock. "But—how?"

"I don't pretend to know that," Spartak said. "I'm just eliminating the things I know to be out of the question, and I find one unknown factor operating. Let's go see her and find out."

"That won't be necessary," a soft voice said, and the panel of the door slid aside to reveal Eunora herself.

Spartak had not realized till this moment how tiny she actually was. She barely came to Vix's elbow, and he was the shortest of the three men. She had borrowed one of the costumes he had seen in Vineta's closet when he boarded the ship on Annanworld, and it hung loosely on her as though she were a child dressing up in her mother's clothes.

"Eunora! Did you take the conditioning off us?" Spartak blurted.

The girl gave a grave nod.

"Then I can't begin to tell you how grateful we are!"

"That's right!" Vix confirmed. His face was alight with enthusiasm. "Why, you may have saved a whole planet's people by saving us that trip to Nylock!"

Eunora didn't answer at once. She walked into the control room with careful, mincing steps, seeming still to be finding out how her unparalyzed legs should support her. Behind her, a trifle nervous, but looking calm enough, came Vineta, who had presumably tried to dissuade her from leaving her cabin and failed.

"I didn't know about this—this *conditioning*," the mutant girl said at last. "It was only when I felt the pain and twisting in your mind —" nodding to Vix—"that I decided I had to find out about it. It's . . . interesting."

A nameless premonition filled the air.

"It's difficult being a mutant," the soft voice went on. "Hardly daring to use the gift—afraid all the time that it will leak out and then there'll be . . . killing. But it's grown without my noticing. I have more talents than I ever realized. I was able to work on your minds like a locksmith picking locks, locating and releasing all the implanted orders." She gave a little crazy giggle. "And when you see how it's done, it's so simple!"

Spartak's whole body had gone cold as ice. He waited numbly for her to make the point which he foresaw with terror.

"Asconel. That's where you want to go. But I don't think I like the idea much. It's an Imperial world—or was. So they don't tolerate my kind of people. Also it's going to be a place of fighting. I can see that in your mind, Vix. You want

to go there and fight against these priests and this man called Bucyon, and because you're so frightened of having your mind probed you'll probably be glad if something bad happens to me. Spartak perhaps not. I don't know. But even he . . ."

She hesitated. Then she giggled again. "Well, I've found out about conditioning now. I see how it's done. I think I can probably make

you do what I want. There's only one question that remains: it's such a big galaxy, so where shall I make you take me?"

She looked around her petrified audience with mocking eyes. "Go on!" she urged. "Think of the other places I might like to be taken—anywhere but Asconel or back where I came from—and then I'll make you pilot me there!"

TO BE CONCLUDED

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# What T and I Did

*I am a decent human being. But  
that T—don't trust him, ever!*

**M**y first awareness is of location. I am in a large conical room inside some vast vehicle, hurling through space. The world is familiar to me, though I am new.

"He's awake!" says a black-haired young woman, watching me with frightened eyes. Half a dozen people in disheveled clothing, the three men long unshaven, gather slowly in my field of vision.

My field of vision? My left hand comes up to feel about my face, and its fingers find my left eye covered with a patch.

"Don't disturb that!" says the tallest of the men. Probably he was once a distinguished figure. He speaks sharply, yet his manner is different, as if I am a person of importance. But I am only—who?

"What's happened?" I ask. My tongue has trouble finding even the simplest words. My right arm lies at my side as if forgotten, but it stirs at my thought, and with its help I raise myself to a sitting position, provoking an onrush of pain through my head, and dizziness.

Two of the women backed away from me. A stout young man puts a protective arm around each of them. These people are familiar to me, but I cannot find their names.

"You'd better take it easy," says the tallest man. His hands, a doctor's, touch my head and my pulse, and ease me back onto the padded table.

Now I see that two tall humanoid robots stand flanking me. I expect that at any moment the doctor will order them to wheel me away to my hospital room. Still, I know better; this is no hospital. The truth will be terrible when I remember it.

"How do you feel?" asks the third man, an oldster, coming forward to bend over me.

"All right. I guess." My speech comes only in poor fragments. "What's happened?"

"There was a battle," says the doctor. "You were hurt, but I've saved your life."

"Well. Good." My pain and dizziness are subsiding.

In a satisfied tone the doctor says:

"It's to be expected that you'll have difficulty speaking. Here, try to read this."

He holds up a card, marked with neat rows of what I suppose are letters or numerals. I see plainly the shapes of the symbols, but they mean nothing to me, nothing at all.

"No," I say finally, closing my eye and lying back. I feel plainly that everyone is hostile to me. Why? I persist: "What's happened?"

"We're all prisoners, here inside the machine," says the old man's voice. "Do you remember that much?"

"Yes." I nod, remembering. But details are very hazy. "My name?" I ask. The old man chuckles drily, sounding relieved. "Why not Thad—for Thaddeus?"

"Thad?" questions the doctor. I open my eye again. Power and confidence are growing in the doctor; because of something I have done, or have not done? "Your name is Thad," he tells me.

"We're prisoners?" I question him. "Of a machine?"

"Of a berserker machine." He sighs. "Does that mean anything to you?"

Deep in my mind, it means something that will not bear looking at. I am spared; I sleep.

When I awake again, I feel stronger. The table is gone, and I recline on the soft floor of this cabin or cell, this white cone-shaped place of imprisonment. The two robots still stand by me, why I do not know.

"Atsog!" I cry aloud, suddenly

remembering more. I had happened to be on the planet Atsog when the great fleet of the unliving, the berserker machines, attacked. The seven of us here were among the few survivors, carried out of the deep shelters by the raiding machines. The memory is vague and jumbled, and invested with horror.

"He's awake!" says someone again. Again the women shrink from me. The old man raises his quivering head to look, from where he and the doctor seem to be in conference. The stout young man jumps to his feet, facing me, fists clenched, as if I had threatened him.

"How are you, Thad?" the doctor calls. After a moment's glance my way, he answers himself: "He's all right. One of you girls help him with some food. Or you, Halsted."

"Help him? God!" The black-haired girl flattens herself against the wall, as far from me as possible. The other two women crouch washing someone's garment in our prison sink. They only look at me and wash away.

My head is not bandaged for nothing. I must be truly hideous, my face must be monstrously deformed, for three women to look so pitilessly at me.

The doctor is impatient. "Someone feed him, it must be done."

"He'll get no help from me," says the stout young man. "There are limits."

The black-haired girl begins to move across the chamber toward me, everyone watching her.

"You would?" the young man marvels to her, and shakes his head.

She moves slowly, as if walking is painful to her. Doubtless she too was injured in the battle; there are old healing bruises on her face. She kneels beside me, and guides my left hand to help me eat, and gives me water. My right side is not paralyzed, but somehow unresponsive.

When the doctor comes close again, I say: "My eye. Can I see?"

He is quick to push my fingers away from the eyepatch. "For the present, you must use only your left eye. You've undergone brain surgery. If you take off that patch now, the consequences could be very serious, let me warn you."

I think he is being deceptive about the eyepatch. Why?

The black-haired girl asks me: "Have you remembered anything more?"

"Yes. Before Atsog fell, we heard that Johann Karlsen was leading out a fleet, to defend Sol."

All of them stare at me, hanging on my words. But they must know better than I what happened.

"Did Karlsen win the battle?" I plead. Then I realize that we are prisoners still.

I weep.

"There've been no new prisoners brought in here," says the doctor, watching me carefully. "I think Karlsen has beaten the berserkers. I think this machine is now fleeing from the human fleet. How does that make you feel?"

"How?" Has my understanding failed with my verbal skills? "Good."

They all relax slightly.

"Your skull was cracked when we

bounced around in the battle," the old man tells me. "You're lucky a famous surgeon was here." He nods his head. "The machine wants all of us kept alive, so it can study us. It gave the doctor what he needed to operate, and if he'd let you die, or remain paralyzed, things would have been bad for him. Yessir, it made that plain."

"Mirror?" I ask. I gesture at my face. "I must see. How bad."

"We don't have a mirror," says one of the women at the sink, as if blaming me for the lack.

"Your face? It's not disfigured," says the doctor. His tone is convincing, or would be if I were not certain of my deformity.

I regret that these good people must put up with my monster-presence, compounding all their other troubles. "I'm sorry," I say, and turn from them, trying to conceal my face.

"You really don't know," says the black-haired girl, who has watched me silently for a long time. "He doesn't know!" Her voice chokes. "Oh—Thad. Your face is all right."

True enough, the skin of my face feels smooth and normal when my fingers touch it. The black-haired girl watches me with pity. Rounding her shoulder, from inside her dress, are half-healed marks like the scars of a lash.

"Someone's hurt you," I say, frightened. One of the women at the sink laughs nervously. The young man mutters something. I raise my left hand to hide my hideous face. My right comes up and crosses over

to finger the edges of the eyepatch.

Suddenly the young man swears aloud, and points at where a door has opened in the wall.

"The machine must want your advice on something," he tells me harshly. His manner is that of a man who wants to be angry but does not dare. Who am I, what am I, that these people hate me so?

I get to my feet, strong enough to walk. I remember that I am the one who goes to speak alone with the machine.

In a lonely passage it offers me two scanners and a speaker as its visible face. I know that the cubic miles of the great berserker machine surround me, carrying me through space, and I remember standing in this spot before the battle, talking with it, but I have no idea what was said. In fact I cannot recall the words of any conversation I have ever held.

"The plan you suggested has failed, and Karlson still functions," says the cracked machine voice, hissing and scraping in the tones of a stage villain.

What could I have ever suggested, to this horrible thing?

"I remember very little," I say. "My brain has been hurt."

"If you are lying about your memory, understand that I am not deceived," says the machine. "Punishing you for your plan's failure will not advance my purpose. I know that you live outside the laws of human organization, that you even refuse to use a full human name. Knowing you, I trust you to help me against the organization of

intelligent life. You will remain in command of the other prisoners. See that your damaged tissues are repaired as fully as possible. Soon we will attack life in a new way."

There is a pause, but I have nothing to say. Then the noisy speaker scrapes into silence, and the scanner-eyes dim. Does it watch me still, in secret? But it said it trusted me, this nightmare enemy said it trusted in my evil to make me its ally.

Now I have enough memory to know its speaks the truth about me. My despair is so great I feel sure that Karlson did not win the battle. Everything is hopeless, because of the horror inside me. I have betrayed all life. To what bottom of evil have I not descended?

As I turn from the lifeless scanners, my eye catches a movement — my own reflection, in polished metal. I face the flat shiny bulkhead, staring at myself.

My scalp is bandaged, and my left eye. That I knew already. There is some discoloration around my right eye, but nothing shockingly repulsive. What I can see of my hair is light brown, matching my two months' unkempt beard. Nose and mouth and jaw are normal enough. There is no horror in my face.

The horror lies inside me. I have willingly served a berserker.

Like the skin around my right eye, that bordering my left eye's patch is tinged with blue and greenish-yellow, hemoglobin spilled under the skin and breaking down, some result of the surgeon's work inside my head.



I remember his warning, but the eye-patch has the fascination for my fingers that a sore tooth has for the tongue, only far stronger. The horror is centered in my evil left eye, and I cannot keep from probing after it. My right hand flies eagerly into action, pulling the patch away.

I blink, and the world is blurred. I see with two eyes, and then I die.

**T** staggered in the passage, growling and groaning his rage, the black eyepatch gripped in his fingers. He had language now, he had a foul torrent of words, and he used them until his weak breath failed. He stumbled, hurrying through the passage toward the prison chamber, wild to get at the wise punks who had tried such smooth trickery to get rid of him. Hypnotism, or whatever. Rename him, would they? He'd show them Thaddeus.

T reached the door and threw it open, gasping in his weakness, and walked out into the prison chamber. The doctor's shocked face showed that he realized T was back in control.

"Where's my whip?" T glared around him. "What wise punk hid it?"

The women screamed. Young Halsted realized that the Thaddeus scheme had failed; he gave a kind of hopeless yell and charged, swinging like a crazy man. Of course T's robot bodyguards were too fast for any human. One of them blocked Halsted's punch with a metal fist, so the stout man yelped and folded up, nursing his hand.

"Get me my whip!" A robot went immediately to reach behind the sink, pull out the knotted plastic cord, and bring it to the master.

T thumped the robot jovially, and smiled at the cringing lot of his fellow prisoners. He ran the whip through his fingers, and the fingers of his left hand felt numb. He flexed them impatiently. "What's a matter, there, Mr. Halsted? Some-thin' wrong with your hand? Don't wanna give me a handshake, welcome me back? C'mon, let's shake!"

The way Halsted squirmed around on the floor was so funny T had to pause and give himself up to laughing.

"Listen you people," he said when he got his breath. "My fine friends. The machine says I'm still in charge, see? That little information I gave it about Karlson did the trick. Sol is lost. Boom! Haw. haw haw! So you better try to keep me happy, 'cause the machine's still backing me a hunnerd per cent. You, Doc." T's left hand began trembling uncontrollably, and he waved it. "You were gonna change me, huh? You did somethin' nice to fix me up?"

Doc held his surgeon's hands behind him, as if he hoped to protect them. "I couldn't have made a new pattern for your character if I had tried — unless I went all the way, and turned you into a vegetable. That I might have done."

"Now you wish you had. But you were scared of what the machine would do to you. Still, you tried somethin', huh?"

"Yes, to save your life." Doc stood up straight. "Your injury pre-

cipitated a severe and almost continuous epileptoid seizure, which the removal of the blood clot from your brain did not relieve. So, I divided the corpus callosum."

T flicked his whip. "What's that mean?"

"You see — the right hemisphere, the dominant one in most people, controls the right side, and handles most judgment involving symbols."

"I know. When you get a stroke, the clot is on the opposite side from the paralysis."

"Correct." Doc raised his chin. "T, I split your brain, right side from left. That's as simply as I can put it. It's an old but effective procedure for treating severe epilepsy, and the best I could do for you here. I'll take an oath on that, or a lie test —"

"Shuddup! I'll give you a lie test!" T strode shakily forward. "What's gonna happen to me?"

"As a surgeon, I can say only that you may reasonably expect many years of practically normal life."

"Normal!" T took another step, raising his whip. "Why'd you patch my good eye, and start calling me Thaddeus?"

"That was my idea," interrupted the old man, in a quavery voice. "I thought — in a man like yourself, there had to be someone, some component, like Thad. With the psychological pressure we're under here, I thought Thad just might come out, if we gave him a chance in your right hemisphere. It was my idea.

If it hurt you any, blame me."

"I will." But T seemed, for the moment, more interested than enraged. "Who is this Thaddeus?"

"You are," said the doctor. "We couldn't put anyone else into your skull."

"Jude Thaddeus," said the old man, "was a contemporary of Judas Iscariot. A similarity of names, but —" He shrugged.

T made a whistling, snorting sound, a single laugh. "You figured there was good in me, huh? It just had to come out sometime? Why, I'd say you were crazy, but you're not. Thaddeus was real. He was there in my head for a while. Maybe he's still there, hiding. How do I get at him, huh?" T raised his right hand and jabbed a finger gently at the corner of his right eye. "Ow. I don't like to be hurt. I got a delicate nervous system. Doc, how come his eye is on the right side if everything crosses over? And if it's his eye, how come I hafta feel what happens to it?"

"I divided the optic chiasm, too. It's a somewhat complicated —"

"Never mind. We'll show Thaddeus who's boss. He can watch with the rest of you. Hey, Blacky, c'mere. We haven't played together for a while, have we?"

"No," the girl whispered. She hugged her arms around herself, nearly fainting. But she walked toward T. Two months as his slaves had taught all of them that obedience was easiest.

"You like this punk Thad, huh?" T whispered, when she halted before him. "You think his face is all

right, do you? How about my face? Look at me!"

T saw his own left hand reach out, and touch the girl's cheek, gently and lovingly. He could see in her startled face that she felt Thaddeus in his hand; never had her eyes looked this way at T before. T cried out and raised his whip to strike her, and his left hand flew across his body to seize his own right wrist, like a terrier clamping jaws on a snake.

T's right hand still gripped the whip, but he thought the bones of his wrist were cracking. His legs tangled each other and he fell. He tried to shout for help, and could utter only a roaring noise. His robots stood watching. It seemed a long time before the doctor's face loomed over him, and the black patch descended gently upon his left eye.

Now I understand more deeply, and I accept. At first I wanted the doctor to remove my left eye, and the old man agreed, quoting some ancient Believers' book to the effect that an offending eye should be plucked out. An eye would be a small price to rid myself of T.

But after some thought, the doctor refused. "T is yourself," he said at last. "I can't point to him with my scalpel, and cut him out, although it seems I helped to separate the two of you. Now you control both sides of the body; once he did." The doctor smiled wearily. "Imagine a committee of three, a troika inside your skull. Thaddeus

is one, T another — and the third is the person, the force, that casts the deciding vote. You. That's the best I can tell you."

And the old man nodded.

Mostly, I do without the eye patch now. Reading and speaking are easier when I use my long-dominant left brain, and I am still Thaddeus — perhaps because I choose to be Thaddeus. Could it be that terribly simple?

Periodically I talk with the berserker, which still trusts in T's greedy outlawry. With their fleet ruined by Karlson, the machines now search for new ways of attacking humanity. This one means to counterfeit much money, coins and notes, give the money to me, and deliver me in small launch to a highly civilized planet, relying on my greed to weaken men there and set them against each other.

But this machine is too damaged to watch its prisoners steadily, or it does not bother. With my freedom to move I have welded some of the silver coins into a ring, chilled this ring to superconductivity, and put it in a chamber near the berserker's unliving heart. Halsted tells me we can use this ring, carrying a permanent electric current, to trigger the launch's C-plus drive prematurely, and tear our berserker open from inside. We may damage it enough to save ourselves. Or we may all be killed.

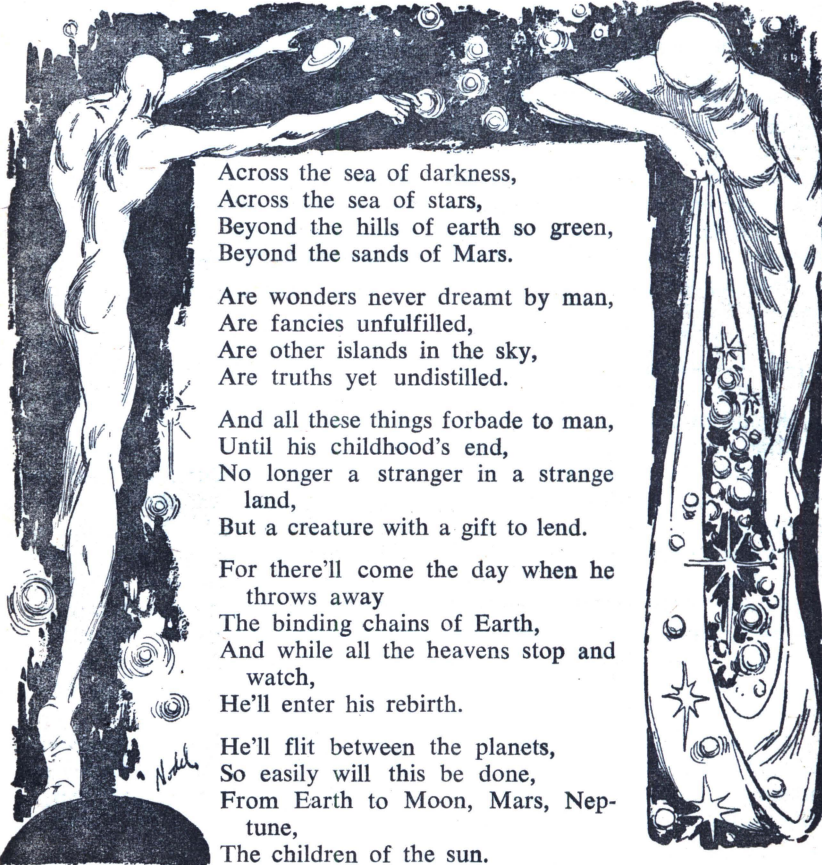
But while I live, I, Thaddeus, rule myself; and both my hands are gentle, touching long black hair.

END

# ACROSS THE SEA OF DARKNESS

by Jeff Renner

Illustrated by NODEL



Across the sea of darkness,  
Across the sea of stars,  
Beyond the hills of earth so green,  
Beyond the sands of Mars.

Are wonders never dreamt by man,  
Are fancies unfulfilled,  
Are other islands in the sky,  
Are truths yet undistilled.

And all these things forbade to man,  
Until his childhood's end,  
No longer a stranger in a strange  
land,  
But a creature with a gift to lend.

For there'll come the day when he  
throws away  
The binding chains of Earth,  
And while all the heavens stop and  
watch,  
He'll enter his rebirth.

He'll flit between the planets,  
So easily will this be done,  
From Earth to Moon, Mars, Nep-  
tune,  
The children of the sun.

(With apologies to Henry Kuttner, C. L. Moore, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, John Wyndham, Poul Anderson, Jack Vance, Clifford D. Simak, Brian W. Aldiss, Frederik Pohl, Jack Williamson, and Alfred Bester)

But there are more than three worlds  
to conquer,  
If man is to become the star king,  
These are but the toddling steps,  
To gain the most valuable thing.

For soon he'll leave his big front  
yard,  
And with it all his fears,  
And embark upon his longest voyage,  
Across the dark light-years.

He'll sail far beyond this horizon,  
Far beyond the reefs of space,  
And here on Earth shall gather the  
stars,  
Members of every conceivable race.

All these things will be done,  
All these things will come to be,  
When a small, lost creature called  
man,  
Sets out to fulfill his destiny—

Across the sea of darkness,  
Across the sea of stars,  
Beyond the hills of earth so green,  
Beyond the sands of Mars.

He'll soar beyond all estimation,  
And to the stars—his destination!



# GREE'S HELLCATS

by C. C. MacAPP

Illustrated by NODEL

*The slaves of Gree hadn't any business on this planet . . . which made it Steve Duke's business to find out why they were there!*

## I

Though it was only a routine investigation of a comet, near an unimportant sun, in a part of the galaxy where Gree's forces weren't expected, Steve Duke took all proper precautions. It was good that he did, for when he brought his squadron of Scout ships out of null the radar screens were suddenly full of blips, at various ranges but converging. Since he couldn't null out again for about ten minutes, he jabbed at certain buttons on his command console and snapped orders into his helmet mike. "All

ships! I'm locking you in central control. Evasive action in thirty seconds. Battle Condition One!" He darted quick looks at his own staff to make sure they were ready. "Com One?" That was his own communications officer, who jerked his head in acknowledgement. Steve told him, "Tape this contact into message drones and send off one a minute. Gunnery One, see that cluster at ten by six by nine? Put a C-6 in front of it."

His gunnery officer punched buttons, and a blue line began to grow from the center of the gunnery plot screen. Steve grinned as a recruit

stared at it nervously. He could remember his own first action.

The blue line disappeared and the visual screens all blanked out momentarily as the missile, a simple light-maker, detonated. The cluster of radar blips had already opened out radially away from the missile's path. They had the sense and the mobility, then, to avoid a single missile. They swerved fast; three or four times the acceleration a humanoid could stand. He glanced at a mass indicator trained on them. The individual objects, whatever they were, had only about a fourth the mass of a man in a spacebag. The metal detector said they weren't metallic.

His evasion pattern began and he fought dizziness from the abrupt changes of direction. He snapped orders to individual ships. "Four; don't let that bunch close in on you. Use local fire-control; light anti-personnel stuff. Six and Eleven, I'm unlocking you. Move out fifty miles to one by five by two and lay proximity mines. Come straight back in and we'll give you a barrage. Four! Watch that bunch ahead of you! They might —" He broke off and punched for a swift realignment and retreat of the whole squadron; but the blips were maneuvering like a swarm of computer-directed hornets, feinting, swerving suddenly into concerted attacks from unguessable angles. "Local Fire Control!" he barked, "All units!"

Then it was a chaos too fast for human senses. The automatics found concentrations and sent mis-

siles streaking; whipped space with giant laser beams. On his console a figure 4 blinked red. A frantic voice screamed tinnily in his earphones. "One One! We're hit! Colonel Duke, we're —" The humanoid, whom Steve recognized by his voice as a young Second-In-Command, got control of himself. "One One, this is Four Two. Compartments One and Three knocked out by low-grade detonation. Radiation low — er, point zero one seven. Do you read me?"

Steve shot a glance at his own Com officer, who nodded and replied to the stricken ship. Steve blocked two more ships into his own fire control and personally laid down a barrage around Six and Eleven, who were still isolated and under heavy attack. He got them back in without serious damage, though Six reported a detonation a few yards from her. Ship Nine died without even a chance to report. His earphones, turned down, were a babble of tiny voices reporting damage. The visual screens were useless, blanked out by a steady hell of explosions. Now, in this close-range melee, his missiles were impotent, or nearly so, but the laser beams, especially the light, quick-aiming ones, were doing good work; and the mine field he'd had the foresight to lay shielded him on one side. The radar screens were full of tiny blips shooting away aimlessly, in free fall.

Suddenly the remaining attackers streaked away, joining into a group — still two dozen or more — then swerving to vanish into the blackness of space. Steve shot a

look at a timer. Still four minutes to null. A sudden impulse seized him.

He snapped, "Evasion ends!" and began unstrapping from his seat. "Two!" he called to his own Second, "Take over. Get me in a bag and outside. Send home a complete follow-up report. Null home with whatever ships can make it. Set up a random course for live ships who can't, and arrange rescue. Come back for me with two ships in — oh, seventy-five minutes."

He propelled himself to the hatch that cut off the middle compartment; jabbed at the manual controls. It opened and he slid through. He had a plastic spacebag unstowed and half rigged before his Second reached him, sputtering, "But — but Colonel!"

"Move," Steve told him with a grin.

They sealed him into the bag and put him out, then nulled away. Far off, to one side of the comet, Number Four and one other ship limped away through normal space, lifetimes from their base if they weren't rescued. Number Nine, to whose course and velocity he was matched, hung dark and lifeless a few hundred yards away.

He approached her slowly, watching his feeble radar screen for any of the hostile blips. When he was fifty yards from her, an object detached itself from her hull and shot away in the direction the raiders had taken. He turned on all the drive he could stand, but it was like chasing a missile. He hit the control

of his photoscanner, though the light from the local sun was weak. Visually, he had a glimpse of something that lifted a small head painfully to stare back at him. The inside of the small spacebag it occupied seemed to be spattered with blood.

He watched it disappear; then, furious at himself for not having sense enough to arrange some kind of a trap, he went back to examine number Nine. She'd been holed, all three compartments, probably by shaped charges. The corpses inside were not pretty. He took pictures then moved away to wait glumly for his rendezvous. He'd been in his share of space battles, and more; and had seen plenty of casualties. But this was the first time he, commanding, had ever lost ships and men.

Six hours later, after a shower and a meal, he gave his first-hand report to his superiors. They were not human, nor even humanoid — unless you could call a short-legged elf, with wings growing from the backs of his shoulders, humanoid. The Birds of Effogus had organized the resistance against Gree.

The highest-ranking one, whom Steve knew well, nodded as Steve finished, and pressed a control on his low desk. The room lights dimmed. "You got better pictures than you think, Colonel," he said in his spidery voice. "Here's a composite of several frames." A projected picture appeared on one wall.

There was more detail than Steve had been able to see. It was an animal, all right, compact and muscular. It was obviously badly hurt. One





paw clutched at a metal fitting of the bag. It had three fingers and a passable thumb. Steve squinted, trying to make out something on the head. "Can those be natural horns?" They looked like two axebledges with serrated edges, rising at a forty-five degree angle from each side of the head, set longitudinally like stabilizer fins on a submarine or aircraft. The animal's mouth was partly open, showing teeth that Steve would have classified as omnivorous.

"They're horns," the Bird croaked. "What about the spacebag, Colonel? Gree workmanship?"

"Yes, sir."

The Bird nodded again. "Colonel, we're concerned about this. Not just as a tactical nuisance; we can devise weapons against that. But it may indicate a big advance in biological science on Gree's part. This animal's braincase is very small for the sort of intelligence you describe." Steve glanced involuntarily at the Bird's own head, and earned a dry chuckle.

"Precisely the point, Colonel. When my ancestors redesigned their bodies, they were able to transfer considerable brain activity to other body tissues, thus permitting smaller heads. We'd be worried if Gree learned how to do that. Therefore, we'd like very much to know where these animals come from, and how they're trained."

Steve said, a trifle sardonically, "I don't suppose there's much chance of finding out."

"It may not be impossible, Colonel. We know a little from this picture. Look at the set of that thumb —

surely arboreal — but there are running pads, too. And the animal must come from a planet with higher gravity than, for instance, your own ancestors were used to. And the fur is scant. Also, there are laws affecting evolution in certain parts of the galaxy, which may help. In addition, we may pick up logistic hints."

"Well," Steve said, "I have a grudge to settle. I'd like to volunteer, in case you find the planet."

The Bird chuckled again. "Your orders are already written, Colonel. As a volunteer."

## II

Steve awoke after a few hours' sleep to find a message telling him to report to the Bird general at the computer labs. He went eagerly, never before having been admitted to that scientific sanctum sanctorum of the Birds'.

Things were a little peculiar inside. The hallways were barely high enough to clear his scalp, even with a little stooping, but they were fifteen-feet wide. The 'doors' that opened off the halls were horizontal panels just below ceiling level, fifteen feet wide but only two feet deep.

The Bird who was guiding him flew near the ceiling, obviously having a little trouble flying slowly enough to match Steve's walk. Around a turn, they met a Bird coming the opposite way who hovered in surprise at seeing a man here. Steve had the presence of mind to press himself against one wall. The oncoming Bird swooped and passed

under Steve's guide, wingtips brushing Steve's belt.

The guide hovered before a panel, which opened for him. From inside, the general's spidery voice called, "Is that you, Colonel Duke? I'm afraid you're going to have to climb in."

In a dimly lit room, the general sat (not perched) on a backless stool, with his wings drooping down behind it. Other Birds on similar stools worked at a row of keyboards along one wall. In the wall above each keyboard was a projection screen three feet square, with two more screens above it, of the same width but only six inches high. A festival of colors and symbols danced on several of the screens, sometimes seemingly in concert.

The general swivelled around on his stool to face the blank wall away from the computers, and motioned with a wingtip to another stool beside him.

"Sit down, Colonel. I want to show you something that happened less than an hour ago."

The lights dimmed farther, and a view of a starfield flashed into being on the blank wall. The scene swung and a deep-space asteroid came into sight, spotily illuminated by light beams from a dozen space-bags. In the bags were humanoids. A small exploration ship, which Steve recognized as friendly, drifted nearby. Ship and bags were tiny toys against the huge bulk of the asteroid. The scene expanded a little as (Steve supposed) the camera drone that was taking the picture moved steadily in.

The bags were settling to the asteroid, ready to begin prospecting. Suddenly, the area was dotted with smaller bags, darting about like gnats. Steve grunted and gripped the seat of his stool, knowing what was to come. The ship moved suddenly, but too late. She died in a quick flurry of detonations that were moderate but deadly enough. The humanoids, who'd been streaking toward her, now scattered in panic. The small bags — the animals in them tiny blurs of motion — darted among them. One by one the larger bags collapsed. Steve was glad the picture wasn't close enough to show details of the humanoids' dying. At the last, a pitiful four or five gathered together for a hopeless mutual defense. Another moderate explosion finished them off.

The projection vanished and the general turned to face Steve. "I'm afraid I underestimated the nuisance value, Colonel. We just happened to have the camera drone there because that was an interesting chunk of rock. Gree nulled those animals to the spot, a mere fifteen of them. I expect reports to start pouring in, of unexplained losses."

Steve controlled the emotion the scene had raised. "Any progress in finding the planet, sir?"

"I think so. Unless we're wrong, we've narrowed it down to a single star cluster." The general turned back toward the computer wall. "If you don't mind staying, we may have something within the next half hour or so."

The weird dance of colors and symbols went on. A Bird near one

end of the line sang something in the high-pitched Effogan language. All the big screens went blank, while current results held on the narrow screens. The general told Steve, "The probability is confirmed. Camera drones are already nulling to the cluster, but meanwhile we'll look at stars already catalogued."

The dance of colors, without symbols this time, resumed, and now Steve realized he was looking at star spectra. The general said, "There's a peculiarity of the Titanium bands in this cluster that could influence the evolution. It's mostly theory, of course, but with high computer probability."

Presently the spectra stopped shifting, and two screens at one end rippled with symbols, working out some complex mathematical problem. The two operators finished and sang soft reports, which the general apparently didn't need, for he was already telling Steve, "It's narrowed down to a few dozen planets. Drones are already moving in. This will take a few minutes; we have to be careful."

In twenty minutes — time for the camera drones to null to the cluster, find the individual planets, seek out land areas, and snap pictures, then null home — one of the operators pulled something from a slot, spread his wings (startling Steve in the confinement of the room), and swooped to the general. The room lights came on. The general peered for a minute at a four-inch-square card, then handed it to Steve. "You can see the animals."

The photo was obviously much enlarged; blurry and confusing. Steve gradually made out clumps of trees on fairly level ground. There were some small objects which one might as well take for a troop of animals as anything else. Yes, he could see it now — the white markings on the heads would be the horns.

"The planet's livable," the general told him, "though the gravity may bother you at first. We thought rather than delay by acclimating you artificially, we'd set you down and let you get used to it first hand."

One of the tricks for sneaking onto an enemy planet was to wait until a meteor shower made ionization trails in the atmosphere and confused enemy radar, if any. There was no shower due, so the Birds made one. Steve landed in a space-bag the power of which barely lasted, wearing a Greeslave Gunner's uniform, in foothills some miles from the spot of the photo. He buried the useless bag, buckled equipment about himself, and started hiking. Somewhere on this continent there were supposed to be hidden labs, and a garrison of Gree humanoid slaves who hunted and processed the animals.

### III

The gravity did tire him at first, though it wasn't really high. He watched local fauna to learn what not to eat, and for signs of danger. There were birds in the sky to warn of aircraft. There was a variety of small game, and plenty of nuts and

berries, though this tended to be a dry planet. The brushland he was in didn't provide much concealment, but he camouflaged his helmet with twigs; and horizontal visibility wasn't great because of heat shimmer. That worked two ways, of course.

The only really dangerous-looking predator was a thing like a large, hairless canine, probably twice his own weight, that hunted singly and silently. It had short, thick legs. There was usually one following him, but evidently only out of curiosity, since none ever gave him the taste test.

He took his time, letting his muscles adjust. After ten days he was comfortable if he didn't exert himself too much. The sun felt good; and the heavy, sagey air was invigorating once he got used to it, except when there was carrion close by.

He'd been traveling gradually downhill, but on the fourteenth day he reached an abrupt levelling off where the ground was less dry and there were clumps of trees. He scouted one of those and found a lookout tree at the edge. Grunting with effort, he climbed it. This looked very much like the terrain of the photograph.

Early the next morning he saw a band of the horned animals. He settled himself in a crotch and uncase his binoculars.

The animals' fur was even thinner than he'd expected, and the beast's sinews stood out like steel cables. This was a group of about three dozen, both sexes and all

ages, with a loose social organization based on strength and sagacity. They ate fruit, nuts, berries, insects, small vertebrates, and birds' eggs when they could get them. More than anything, they reminded him of large rodents, except for the horns and the strongly prehensile tails. Their legs were short, but had ball-and-socket joints at the elbows as well as at the shoulders. They ran usually on all fours but could stand erect. They were extremely fast, and, in the trees, real acrobats.

The horns were about three inches from front to back, roughly the same height from base to pronged edges, and an inch thick at the base. The ear-holes were below the horns, as if they used sound reflection from them.

They were certainly quick, bright animals, and it was clear that they'd adapt readily to space; but they were, after all, just animals. Nothing about them indicated any intelligence capable of using instruments or even tools. So, as the Birds suspected, Gree must be upgrading them.

**I**t was another seventeen days before he was lucky enough to find a hunt.

A fleet of aircars appeared, landed, and discharged squads of humanoids who joined into a line. They moved slowly, in a direction that would take them past Steve if he stayed put. Then more aircars went over, and he could guess where they'd put down to add another segment of a wide circle. He could still get outside that circle, if he wanted to.

A troop of the horned animals flashed by, and he knew the country well enough to guess where they were going. There was a hollow not far away where the trees were thicker. That, of course, was where the hunt would converge, penning in all the animals in the area. He decided suddenly he wanted to be there.

He slid down from his tree and made a quick cache of the instruments he didn't dare carry, then ran, keeping under cover, to get inside the circle. A large band of animals wheeled to face him, old males to the front, but he skirted them and they didn't attack. There were other bands in sight, all retreating to the hollow. One of the big predators trotted by, its ears pressed low to its head, ignoring Steve and the horned animals.

He reached the edge of the thicket, penetrated a way, and found himself a dense patch of brush to hide in. More of the quarry streaked by, many of them taking to the trees and leaping from limb to limb. In fifteen minutes he heard voices. There seemed to be a halt for final organization, then the hunt came on into the thicket.

Soft popping sounds began, punctuated with angry roars and shrieks of the animals, and occasionally with the splat of a laser rifle. The hunters thrashed by in the brush on both sides of him, and emerged into the small glade at the edge of which he'd chosen to hide.

There were men and B'lant and half a dozen other slave humanoid races, with a few Overseers di-

recting them. Every other man in the line carried an air gun shooting anesthetic darts. They chose young animals, not too high in the trees and not too close to themselves. The poison acted within seconds, and the brush was full of brief thrashings. The odd men in line carried laser rifles and used them when the animals attacked. The thicket was a bedlam now, of screaming animals and shouting men and the sound of the guns, and the thrashing about in the brush.

A group of old males suddenly charged from hiding. There was a short chaos of laser beams, hurtling forms, yells and screams and roars. Other hunters closed in from both sides to help, and the attack was beaten off, but six or seven hunters lay motionless or twisted in pain. Overseers shouted to get the line reformed, spoke into their throat-mikes (no doubt calling for med techs), then moved the hunt on. It vanished toward the center of the hollow.

This was Steve's chance to get into the secret base!

He shoved his laser pistol and some other things deep in the brush, then crawled into the open, acting dazed in case any of the wounded were watching. He picked up a dart-gun and wandered after the hunt.

A wounded animal hurtled at him suddenly and he barely got the gun-butt up in time to ward it off. There was a crunch of bone and it lay still. That gave him a better idea than catching up with the hunt. When the hunt was over, the squads

would be rounded up and counted by their Overseers—but the wounded would probably go back separately, as they were picked up, without an immediate check. And there was always confusion in the med stations when a lot of casualties came in; and confusion was just what he wanted.

He took his knife and made a small cut in the left sleeve of his uniform, below the elbow, so it would rip. Then he deliberately gashed his forearm on the horns of the dead animal. Blood welled out and he tore the sleeve off the uniform to make a crude compress. Then he went back to the glade, muttered a few words to the conscious wounded there, and sat down with his back against a tree.

Before long an aircar settled to the glade, and two med techs ran around giving treatment where it was needed immediately. They loaded four of the worst cases and took off, telling Steve and the others that there'd be another car. There was, within minutes, and Steve climbed aboard.

His gash burned like the devil as they swabbed it with antiseptic, and he pretended to half faint so no one would ask him any questions.

#### IV

The base was underground. They entered by an opening whose camouflage Steve sincerely admired.

They dumped him at a med station where casualties and techs were milling around in enough confusion so he could slip from one line to

another. He got by a preliminary questioning by giving a name and number at random and acting dazed. He got rid of his torn uniform, got some skin-patch sprayed on his cut, then went through a med booth that sniffed, prodded, and sprayed before spitting him out, theoretically disinfected and viable. He got out of that line quickly and went looking for a uniform he could wear.

There were many uniforms being discarded by casualties about to get treatment. He got his hands on a fairly fresh-looking uniform, an Apprentice Astrogator's, before it went into a laundry chute. Carrying it over an arm, he headed toward the latrine. A med tech stopped him and began to ask questions, but Steve grinned and pointed to the latrine and acted urgent, and the tech let him go. He donned the uniform inside, waited a few minutes, then left.

He edged into a group who'd already been processed and were being released, and got out of the med station with them. Outside, he found a chance to slip away. Now he had to stay inconspicuous until he knew his way around. He found a recreation area where some B'lant were playing a very accurate game of quoits. He stayed there, seeing all he could, until mealtime, then joined a line, and ate with the general pool.

It was apparent by now that the general pool here was made up of washouts or battle veterans in some way unfit for first-line duty. Some of them acted as if they'd had brain damage or brain surgery to remove

dangerous memories. In other words, a collection of low-grade expendables to use in the hunts. That suited Steve. A few peculiarities on his own part would go unnoticed.

There was the usual Overseer's section of the mess, and another where slaves other than the general pool ate. In this latter section he saw many computer techs and a lot of meds. Possibly the meds, most of them, were actually working as veterinarians.

Steve couldn't hope to stay free long, just wandering around; some Overseer was sure to round him up and put him through an Inquisitor booth. He knew he didn't have the personality conditioning to fool the booths, as he had once. He must find a hiding spot; or, better but less likely, a way in and out of the base.

Then he remembered they were underground. That meant a considerable ventilating system.

**I**t took some precarious searching, but he located a storeroom with a ventilator grill big enough to crawl into and hidden enough to work at. It was a food storeroom, so the natural thing was to attach himself to a work party from the kitchens and hide out when they left the storeroom. He had a table knife he'd stolen, and a pair of pliers he'd gotten the same way.

He not only had to get the grill loose, but put it back after he was in the duct. He finally accomplished that, then crawled along the duct, having a hard time where it turned vertical to ceiling level. Once there, he crawled along until he found an

access hatch. He worked at its nuts and bolts until he could get out.

He was in a dark place, with the feel of plenty of room around him. He listened and heard nothing but the hum of blowers and the whoosh of the drafts. As his eyes adjusted he saw a spot of luminosity over his head, and another not far away. Finally he realized this was not an attic, but a natural cave, with the roof high overhead. The spots of luminescence were airshafts to the surface, doubtless with two or more bends in them so debris wouldn't fall in. The buildings lay along the bottom of the cave like a string of boxes. The air ducts ran along the top of the buildings.

But down the middle of the line of buildings was a vertical partition that seemed to go up to the cave roof. He explored along that until he found a door, latched but not locked. He opened it carefully, and there was a slight hiss as an airtight seal parted. He understood the layout, then. The cave was split into halves, longitudinally. The side with the ducts was pressure intake; on the other side, stale air found its own way out of each room, and out of the cave by a separate line of shafts.

He thought that might make his spying easier. However, he found there were not simply grills in the ceiling of each room; there were light traps that had to be removed before he could see in. He managed with the table knife and pliers, but he decided on his next trip inside he'd acquire some better tools.

Before he began spying, he look-



ed around for emergency hiding places. On the other side, the branching and turning ducts offered nooks and nests. On this side there were none. But the buildings did not touch the cave wall, and between there was a dark gap, varying in width, at the bottom of which he could hear a faint trickle of water. It wasn't far down; and by experimenting he found that, at a place where the rock wall approached close, he could work his way down, pressing his back against the building.

**T**he captured animals were easy to locate by the smell that came out of the ventilators. There were a number of pens, each holding a few animals and equipped with feeding and watering apparatus.

Farther along were chutes into which the animals were driven, one by one. Each animal got a jab with a needle that produced quick anesthesia. The inert animals were strapped belly down on tables; where techs using small power tools with hole-saw blades cut circular openings, an inch and a half in diameter, on the inward side of each of the animals' horns. The horns were hollow, with moderately thin walls, leaving space inside. Into this space other techs inserted bits of miniaturized apparatus, positioning them carefully, nearly filling each horn, and finally forcing in some kind of cement or mastic to make a solid fit. After that the cut-out discs were replaced. They even had thin annular rings of horn or bone to make a tight fit. No doubt the horn would grow together.

Steve could see no mechanical connections to the brain, and he imagined there'd be fairly thick skull under the horns. There must be electronic fields from the gadgets, then; like the much greater fields that probed one's bodily responses in an Inquisitor booth. Were the things just pain producers, to control the animals? He didn't think so. His encounter with the band in spacebags hadn't indicated remote control. And of course there was no concept in the animal's brains of the difference between a lie and the truth.

Some kind of brain supplements, then; perhaps like computer memory banks, somehow communicating with the dim minds.

He went further down the line, and was not surprised to find galleries jammed with artificial training aids. He could guess at what went on: simulated space targets; recognition training, including some identification of friends via secret radio signals; specific sets of circumstances to be recognized and corresponding ways to react; reward-and-punishment. No wonder the beasts were effective, with this and with their quick reflexes.

He wondered what, if anything, would happen if he got a set of the gadgets, wrapped up or taped the components in their proper relationship (he could see it was simple) and held them against his own head.

Of course his duty was to steal a set of the things and escape with them. But he couldn't escape with them until he got them; and once he had them, it shouldn't be too much of a risk to try them out.

He slipped back into the buildings, had another meal, and spied around some more. Then, re-entering the ducts, he went from storeroom to storeroom, acquiring a razor, a new Gunner's uniform, two laser pistols, some tools, and a few other items he might want. He had a shower and shave before he went looking for the gadgets.

He found where they were stored, waited until the place was deserted, and stole a set, still boxed, from the rear of a shelf lot. He went back up to the exhaust side of the cave, squeezed his way down into the gap between cave wall and buildings, and walked along the smoothed cave floor until he had more room and didn't have to stand in mud. He risked a small light and got the instruments, a set for each side of his head, fastened in their proper relationships with gummed-rubber tape. They had their own power supplies. Gingerly at first, he held them against his head, at the right angle, just above his ears. There was nothing. He moved them closer, finally pressing them against his skull, disappointed.

Then, just as he was about to give up, there was an odd kneading sensation in his head, not painful, followed by a lightning confusion of scenes, phrases, and concepts from his own memory. Some of them he hadn't thought of for years. They followed no pattern that he could discern. They stopped, and suddenly a soundless voice shouted in his head, I! I AM I! SKELETON,

MUSCLES, VISCERA, BRAIN; LUNGS BREATHING, HEART PUMPING! HERE! NOW! IN THIS CAVE! I'LL SUCCEED! I'LL GET THESE AWAY, AND IT WILL THWART GREE, AND

—  
There was an awful blast of sound, pressure, agony, terror. He jerked the things from his head and leaned, gasping, against the rough rock. Gradually, his wits returned. What had happened?

It must have been his triumphant thought against Gree. Of course! The animals, by some concept — some vague image of kind master and protector — would be taught obedience and loyalty to Gree, just as humanoid slaves were.

There were obviously feedbacks in the instruments, and artificial guilt feelings, and monitor circuits. Carefully, he brought the things near his head again. He found he could only avoid the thought — feelings, rather — that brought on the punishment, by thinking hard of other things.

He concentrated on an abstract thought, as well as he could: *A planet without inclination or eccentricity has no seasons, unless its sun is a variable or there is some other outside influence.* There were only vague echoes of the concepts *planet* and *sun*. He tried thinking of the word-sounds: *Twenty-one times fifty-seven is . . .* Instantly, the words *eleven hundred ninety-seven* popped into his mind.

The thing was a computer, then, as well as a monitor. That didn't

surprise him. What surprised him was that it was programmed to compute from English words representing numbers. He remembered the kneading sensation, and the flash of ideas, when he'd first put the things to his head. Maybe there was some sort of self-adjustment by the gadgets; some zeroing-in to fit the individual mind. Maybe they were designed for use on other animals than their particular species, in addition.

As he stood there wondering, there was a whisper of thought: *Attention! Sounds! A door in the partition opening; that one a hundred and sixty paces away from the spot on the partition opposite you. Two sets of footsteps. One foot of one man drags a little. There's an oddity in the echoes; there must be a vault in the cave right there that distorts it. They're moving the other way. Note the angle of their course; about twenty-five degrees, converging, on the way you're facing . . .* Astounded, Steve listened. It was all coming from his own mind, of course. But things seemed to be amplified. His ears were as keen as a cat's; he also seemed to be sniffing the air. And the spatial sense was incredible. Just by listening — and computing the time lag for the sound to reach him — he could have aimed a pistol, if the building were not in the way, giving exactly the proper lead.

He decided he'd better get out of his present position while they were headed the other way. They might shine a flashlight down into the gap. Before he took the gadgets from his head, they whispered, *There was*



*that foothold, seventeen inches up from the floor; and the other one for the right foot, five inches above and two inches to the side. Don't forget that sharp point that dug into your finger . . .* Suddenly shivering, he jerked the things away from his skull and stuffed them in his pockets. He'd climb out under his own power.

The quicker he got out of the base and off-planet, the better. He could possibly sneak into a hunting party and desert it in the brush, but he might wind up a long way from his caches, with no way to signal the Birds. It would be better to use Gree transportation. But how?

He got through the partition and hurried to where his loot was hidden. He wiped the mud off his shoes and changed into the fresh uniform, which would give him some privileges and an excuse to wear a pistol. But where would he hide the brain-gadgets? They'd bulge too much in the pockets of the one-piece uniform.

A pressure suit! Those were clear plastic, but had plenty of slack, and enough apparatus at various places to hide the gadgets. And, if he were going via spaceship (which, he thought wryly, he seemed to have decided, however overoptimistically) a suit would be natural.

He hid what he wasn't taking, found the right duct and got into it, and crawled to the storeroom where the suits were issued. By now he had rope and a clamp to make the vertical part of the trip easy. At floor level, he peered out into the storeroom. There were voices and the scrape of shoes, but no one in

sight. He got the grill loose, crawled out, and replaced the grill. The voices, and the sound of work, came from behind a barrier of ceiling-high shelves. He went to the end of that row and peered around. Two humanoids were stowing suit fittings into the shelf bins. When they both faced away, he slipped past and went down the crossaisle to the front of the compartment. Down at the middle aisle, a man with Storekeeper's shoulder insignia sat at a desk, working at an adding machine.

Steve drew back and went between the shelves almost to the middle aisle, a few feet behind the man. He put his head in a bin to muffle his voice, and tried to imitate the accent of the particular kind of humanoids who were working farther back. "Storekeeper!"

A voice said, "What is it?"

Steve called again, more urgently, "Storekeeper!" A chair squeaked and the man stepped into sight. His eyes darted toward Steve, but Steve's fist was already crashing at the man's temple. He went limp and Steve caught him and lowered him silently. He dragged him a few feet from the aisle, then stepped swiftly to the desk. He sat down and pulled open drawers until he found the kind of requisition form he wanted, and also the storekeeper's electronic signature stamp. He scribbled, stamped, and went back to where the two humanoids were at work. "Where's the storekeeper?"

They looked at him dully, then one finally said, "He, uh, was at desk."

Steve shrugged. "He's not there

now." He thrust out the requisition. "Where do I find a double-S Nine? I'm in a rush."

The one who'd spoken hesitated, glanced at Steve's Gunner, Class Three, insignia, then turned to lead the way.

Steve got the right suit and kept his eyes on the humanoid to make sure he went back to work and not toward the desk. Then he left and hurried along the corridor to the nearest latrine, where he put on the suit and stowed the brain-gadgets.

## VI

Since no ships landed or left via atmosphere, the base must have a null tank. The largest kind, big enough to receive a Scout, consisted of four concentric steel tanks, very large and very stout walled, with air pumps between. They were pumped out, with graduated degrees of thoroughness, until the inner one had a hard vacuum. Not that a vacuum was necessary to null out — a ship could null out of atmosphere, or even an ocean, and only leave an implosion behind — but incoming ships needed the vacuum, because to materialize into space where there were more than a very few atoms of matter would require impossible amounts of power. There'd almost certainly be a Scout in the tank, ready to go, as that was standard practice unless a ship was due in and the tank was being pumped out.

He made inquiries and confirmed that, as he'd expected, the tank was deeper in the cave. He walked, rath-

er than visit the ground car transportation pool.

Eventually he reached a fence, with an Inquisitor Booth, beyond which was a lighted, swelling part of the cave, with the huge cylinders looming in it. There were two armed B'lant on guard. He walked up to them and said, "I'm supposed to report to somebody named Kwale."

"Where are your orders?" one B'lant asked.

"I suppose he has them. I just got a verbal order, a few minutes ago."

The B'lant stared at him for a second. "What was zat name?"

"Kwale."

The B'lant muttered into his throat-mike, then waited, listening to his earplug. Presently he frowned at Steve. "Zere is no record."

Steve made a helpless gesture. "I don't know about it. I just got a call, for guard duty. I was supposed to get this suit from stock, and when I got there they had a requisition already, from this Kwale."

"Wait," the B'lant said, and muttered again. He listened, then nodded. He said, "Zere was a requisition filed, for a rush order, by a Storekeeper named Kwale. But why should a Storekeeper give you orders?"

"How should I know?" Steve asked. "It was something about a special shipment we were going to pick up. I supposed some Overseer had ordered me along, as a guard."

The B'lant grunted. "Maybe zo. Where is zis Kwale?"

"Why, I thought he'd be inside."

The B'lant pondered briefly. "We

change ze guard not long ago. Maybe you are right. Anyway, zrough ze booth." He reached for a button and the outer door of the booth swung open.

This was what Steve had been working for. He started into the booth, but stopped the door from closing with his foot. He perked out his pistol, thrust it around the edge of the booth, and slashed back and forth with the beam. There were two hoarse screams, and a beam sizzled on the booth inches from his hand. He heard the bodies fall. His laser pistol fused the lock on the inner door and he burst through, already running toward the small door in the looming cylinder. No one saw him coming, apparently. He went through the door. A humanoid, a mere clerk but armed, looked up from a desk. Steve walked toward him, fumbling beneath his suit as if for his orders, then suddenly struck hard at the throat with the points of his doubled knuckles. The humanoid gasped and staggered, and Steve hurled him sideways and struck lethally at the back of the neck. He swiftly scanned the controls on the desk, punched at some of them, and ran toward the lock which opened into the outer tank.

By the time that one ground open, the inner ones had too. He went through them without breaking stride, already seeing the hull of a Scout in the inner tank. He turned and slapped at the manual controls of the inner hatch, stared out impatiently until it cut off his vision.

He thought he heard a shout just as it closed. He set the controls so they couldn't be overridden from outside unless they got at the wiring and made a short-circuit.

He opened the hatch of the Scout and slid in, his eyes going immediately to the console. Plenty of fuel, but no charge in the null-accumulators. It would take ten minutes to build that up. He shut the hatch and punched buttons, got the field building up, then turned on outside viewers so he could watch the tank's hatch.

Now there was nothing he could do but wait. There were two things his enemies could do. They could tear into the wiring — he thought that would take a half hour or so — or they could bring in a heavy laser and cut into the tank. But that might take more than ten minutes, too.

About when he expected it, the familiar paternal voice came over the radio. "You, in the tank. What are you doing there?" He grinned and did not answer. The more time they wasted talking, the better. The voice said, "What is your name? It is Gree who asks." A little later, more sternly, "Come out! Gree commands! You will not be punished. You are sick; you will be made well."

Steve let it talk on, while he punched out a program for a null-hop to a rendezvous. There was a hiss from somewhere, pinching out as a gasket sealed. Steve went taut. What were they doing?

A gauge gave him the answer:

pressure outside the ship was down by a couple of pounds. They were pumping out the inner tank. *Why?*

Suddenly, he knew. A bomb! They were pumping down so they could null a bomb into the tank with him! Somewhere, maybe only a few thousand miles out in space, a Gree ship-of-the-line hung, null-projector locked on the co-ordinates of this tank. It would not have to be a big bomb, and they might not need a very hard vacuum. He glanced at a timer. Still six minutes to null. He looked at the gauge that showed outside pressure. He began to sweat. They'd be ahead of him by three minutes or so.

He still had one resource. There was air in the Scout; not only the air in the compartments, but reserve air, compressed in tanks. The huge pumps handled a lot of air fast, but it was the final traces that took time. When they got down to a fair vacuum, he'd bleed out the Scout's air and let them struggle with that.

The outside pressure crawled down to a fraction of a pound. He cracked the hatches of the other compartments so air leaked out slowly. No use making it obvious. He could feel the vibration of the escaping air. When the compartments other than his own were empty, he started releasing compressed air. The gauge needle wavered. Surely they'd guess now. He set his suit to hold ten pounds; and let his own compartment bleed down to that. He thought he could stay conscious at ten pounds, even though he was acclimated to the planet's eighteen.

The vibration of escaping air ended, and now there was only the throb of the great pumps, faintly felt through the steel of the tanks and of the ship. He stared at the timer. Incredible, there were still four minutes to null. Gradually he understood that he was beaten. A sickness grew in his middle; not so much fear as an awful remorse. He'd been cocky. He'd taken a risky, hasty way. If he'd been content with sneaking out . . .

He felt light-headed now, from the change in pressure. The outside gauge showed less than a quarter of a pound. It seemed he could feel the pumps more distinctly now, like martial drums beating out the instants to his execution. He found himself hunching his shoulders against the bomb, and straightened angrily. He would *not* die just standing here! He could leave the ship and get the inner tank's lock open; get to the second tank, at least. Probably they'd be waiting there. Or they might just let him stay, sealed up, and go ahead with their bomb. Then he'd be trapped in the two inner tanks to be dealt with at leisure.

He unsealed the suit to get at his laser pistol. If it came to a shoot-out, he hoped his light-headedness wouldn't slow his reflexes or affect his aim. He felt pretty well, but anoxia was deceptive. He was finished, of course. But he wanted very badly to take a few of them with him at the last; not just be stepped on, like a bug.

As he drew the pistol his hand

brushed against the brain-gadgets in his pocket. He grinned. It would be a nice irony if he could use their own invention to bolster up his reflexes and help him get one or two of them. He glanced at the timer. He didn't think the bomb was due for another half minute, or possibly two-thirds. With awkward fingers, he got the gadgets out and shoved them inside his helmet, jammed them up until they were at his temples. He was very careful not to think any hostile thoughts against Gree; he concentrated hard on self-preservation. He sealed the suit again and reached for the hatch control.

"Are you sure," the soundless voice murmured in his head, "that you've thought of every resource?"

Annoyed, though he knew he was only hearing thoughts dredged from his own subconscious, he said aloud, "I've let out every bit of air except what's in this compartment and in my suit. That wouldn't last more than a few seconds!"

"Are you sure?" the voice persisted. "What is air?"

"A gas, of course!" he snorted angrily, and reached again for the control.

"What is a gas?"

"Damn it!" he snarled — then went silent, gaping. A gas is . . . something in the gaseous state.

He darted a look at the timer, at the outside-pressure gauge, at another gauge. The calm that had

settled over him with his acceptance of doom shattered. An awful anxiety replaced it; an actual physical ache. He leaped for the console. Would he have time?

Vaporized water is a gas; and the ship's tanks held over seven hundred gallons of water.

He felt the new vibration as water spewed out. He stared at the timer's second hand as if that were the thing that controlled fate. The outside viewer showed vapor curling from the floor, to be whisked away by the pumps. More water poured out and bubbled on the tank's floor, soaking up calories from the steel. The whole tank began to fog. He was laughing aloud now, not quite sanely. The pressure gauge crawled away from zero.

He leaned over the computer keyboard, but before he could touch the keys the brain-gadgets were already computing: "*At Terrestrial sea level, standard conditions, one volume of water yields eighteen hundred volumes of vapor . . .*"

It turned out that he had more than enough. Impudently, ignoring the Gree voice that suddenly shouted at him again, he closed the dump valves and saved two hundred gallons.

Presently he nulled to safety.

He removed the gadgets from his helmet and held them in his hand, hoping the Birds would let him join the testing and experimentation. He could think of some fascinating possibilities.

END





# OUR MARTIAN NEIGHBORS

by JOHN McCALLUM

*The kids just loved having guests. It was wonderful of Earth to keep sending them!*

The sun poured heat that shimmered and rolled across the Martian desert. It hammered and burned the man stumbling across the loose red sand.

The man moved very slowly and he fell often. And each time he fell he lay face down with the sun hot on his head and the smell of ancient dust in his nostrils and he thought about not getting up again. But always the heat, and his thirst, and the fear of death drove him.

He had been walking for three days, seeing nothing but sand and sky and the sun that was killing him. He found the glass house on the morning of the fourth day.

The house looked like an inverted bowl. Forty feet in diameter, it rose to a height of twenty feet in a flawless curve. The glass had a bluish tint.

The man kept on the sand and waited for the house to vanish. It didn't, and he got up and walked unsteadily towards it.

The dome seemed to resist the full glare of the sun, filtering out the harshness and letting in a soft light that looked cool and inviting. The interior walls were a solid darker blue.

The man staggered the last few yards and sprawled on the sand. He lay gasping in the thin air. After awhile he raised his head.

Two children were standing inside the wall watching him. A boy and a girl. The girl looked about five years old. Dark hair cut short. Cute. She wore a short dress and sandals.

The boy looked about a year older. Dark curly hair like the girl. Short

pants, sandals, short-sleeved shirt. Cool. A handsome little boy.

The man lay still. He watched the children.

They smiled at him.

He climbed painfully to his knees. His body was stiff and his tongue felt like a mouthful of broken glass.

The little boy spoke. "What are you doing out there?"

The man smiled at the children and got slowly to his feet. His head filled with a thundering noise and blackness rolled across his eyes. He leaned his hands on the wall, feeling the smooth glass as though it was miles away while the desert tilted and rolled. His vision cleared and gradually the dizziness passed.

The children watched him.

"Hello," he said. His voice cracked and his head felt strange.

"Who are you?" the little boy asked.

"My name is Price. I crashed here. Look — I need water! Let me in, will you?"

The little girl smiled up at him, her face curious and her eyes big and friendly. "Why are you outside? Aren't you hot?"

"I sure am. Listen, I need water in the worst way. Let me in."

"Who are you?" the little boy asked.

"I told you. My name is Price. John Price. I crashed here. Just let me in and I'll tell you all about it."

"Why are you outside?" the little girl asked. "Aren't you hot?"

"Yes. Of course I'm hot. Listen, if you'll just . . ."

"Who are you?" the little boy asked.

"I told you. Price. John Price. Look, it's a long story." He licked his cracked lips. His tongue felt thick and swollen. "I crashed here, see? I'm from Earth. Earth, not Mars. I walked across the desert. I've got to . . ."

"You shouldn't be outside," the little girl said. "It's too hot."

"I know that. I don't . . ."

"Who are you?"

"I told you who I am," Price shouted. He broke down coughing. The shouting hurt his throat. "Listen! I've got to have water right now. Let me in and I'll . . ."

"Do you like it outside?"

"No!" Price screamed. "Christ, no!" He put his face close to the wall. "Listen! Go tell your mother! Tell her . . ."

A woman walked into the room. Thirtyish and pretty. Her dark hair was cropped short and curled loosely against her head. She wore a short dress, light blue like the house and belted at the waist.

She smiled at Price, nodding politely. "Come on, you kids," she said. "Get your breakfast."

"Aw, Mom."

"Come on. You can talk afterwards." She took the children's hands and smiled apologetically at Price.

"Lady, listen to me. Please. I've got to . . ."

They walked out of the room.

Price stared after them in amazement. He hit the wall. "For Christ's sake, what's the matter with

you? Are you all deaf? Let me in!"

He pushed away from the wall and started around the house. He stumbled and sprawled full length in the loose sand. He rested and then climbed painfully to his feet. He walked slowly and carefully around the house to the dining room and looked in.

The woman and children were seated at a table. Eating breakfast. They drank water out of tall glasses. The center of the table held a big curved pitcher brimming with water and ice cubes.

The little girl emptied her glass and refilled it. She turned and waved to Price.

His legs felt like dry rubber. He leaned against the wall and stared at the glass in the little girl's hand. She raised her glass to her mouth and drank noisily. Water trickled down her chin to her neck. She wiped her mouth with a chubby hand.

"Don't drink so fast," her mother said. "You'll get a tummy ache."

"I don't drink too fast," the little boy said. "Do I, Mom?"

"No, honey. That's fine."

"She should be more polite. Eh, Mom?"

"I am so polite," the little girl protested. "I am! Aren't I, Mummy?"

"Yes, sweetheart. You're polite. You're both polite. Now hurry up and finish your breakfast."

Price hammered the wall with the palm of his hand. It made a soft padded sound. "Hey, lady! Let me in! I need water."

She picked up her glass.

"I've got to have water!"

She looked at the little boy and said, "Hurry up now."

"Lady, please! For God's sake! I need water. I'll die!"

She put her glass to her mouth and sipped at it.

Price kicked the wall. He pressed against it, hitting it with both hands. "Open up!" he screamed. "I'm thirsty, I tell you. I need water!" He hammered the wall, kicking and pounding at it in fear and fury. He filled his lungs and screamed as hard as he could.

She finished her drink and put her glass aside.

He slumped to the sand. Tired, he thought. I'm tired, too. This isn't doing me any good.

He got to his feet again and began circling the house, examining the wall, looking for a door. He walked around the house without finding an opening in the smooth glass.

He hit the wall. "Hey! Let me in! I need water."

Nothing.

He sat on the sand. "Alright," he muttered. "You've got to look this way sometime. I'll wait here till you do."

The sun was hot. He sat on the sand and looked into the house and thought of all the water he had swam in and waded through and sailed over. His eyes were hot and his body sagged. Tiny fingers of fear and urgency plucked at him, but he drove them back and closed his eyes and thought about waterfalls and lawn sprinklers and grass cut short with the dew clinging to it.

**“You kids want any more water?”** The woman’s question came faintly to him.

**“No, Mom.”** The little boy had a nice clear voice.

**“I’ll throw it out then.”**

He jerked his head up. Ten feet away a door had opened in the glass wall. The woman stood in the opening. She held the pitcher in her hand.

**“Wait!”** Price called.

The woman poured the water onto the sand. She shook the pitcher. Price dragged himself to his knees. **“Wait!”** he called.

The woman stepped back into the house.

His thirst and his fear and the screaming of his arid body rushed at him and he scrambled to his feet. **“Wait!”** He stumbled for the opening in the wall.

It swung shut.

Price pushed on the glass. There was no sign where the door had been. He pounded the wall weakly. **“Wait!”** he croaked. **“Let me in. Please.”**

The woman placed the empty pitcher on the table. She sat down, her back to Price.

He wheeled around, searching for where the water had landed. The spot looked dark. He dropped prone and pressed his mouth to the desert. He dug his tongue into it, feeling for moisture. He clawed at it. The sand was dry. He opened his mouth wide and bit into the sand and it filled his mouth and tore his cracked lips. He inhaled, clutched his throat and coughed in agony. He lay with his face on the desert and coughed up the lining of his throat.

After a while he turned his head and looked into the house. The children were standing inside the wall watching him.

The little girl smiled shyly. **“You shouldn’t eat sand,”** she said. **“It isn’t good for you.”** She turned to the boy and said, **“It isn’t good to eat sand, is it?”**

**“Gosh, no,”** he said. He looked curiously at Price. **“Why do you eat it?”**

Price looked at the children. Heat rolled over him in suffocating waves. He got to his hands and knees and crawled to the wall.

**“Why do you eat sand?”** the little boy said.

Price examined the friendly little faces. **“Don’t you understand?”** he said. He looked at the girl. **“Can’t you see? I’m dying out here.”**

**“Sand isn’t good for you.”**

**“Please give me water. Just a little.”**

**“You shouldn’t eat sand.”**

**“Please.”**

**“Why do you eat it?”**

He fell against the wall. He coughed. Blood from his cracked lips and torn throat sprayed the glass. He pressed his mouth to the wall and pawed weakly at it.

**“Maybe he likes sand.”**

He began to whisper. He pressed his mouth to the wall and whispered and each time he exhaled it made a rasping sound in his throat and blood smeared on the glass.

**“Do you like sand, Mister?”**

He slumped sideways to the desert. His head dropped and his eyes closed. The sand burned his cheek but he had no strength so he lay

there and after a while his mind drifted. His body felt dry, but his mind found lakes of blue and streams that raced over big round boulders and shimmered cold and wet under the shade of green trees.

He slept.

He woke to heat. Blind, inhuman heat. The sun seared him. Heat reflected from the sand like a blast furnace. He dragged his eyes open, the lids like hot lead weights. He lay still. Not moving and breathing shallowly.

Dry. Dry, he thought. The absolute ultimate. The absolute, absolute ultimate of dry sticks and stones and bones and bones. His thoughts fluttered and sank and flopped in the heat. And sticks and stones and dry, dry bones. He opened his mouth and his lips split. He rolled his eyes slowly without moving his head. The woman was standing beside him on the sand.

"Are you all right?" she said.

He moved his mouth but no sound came out.

"Are you all right?"

His mouth moved jerkily. "Wath."

"Pardon?"

"Watha."

The woman smiled kindly. "You had us worried," she said. "I'm glad you're all right."

"Water."

"We thought maybe you were sick or something."

He pushed himself to his hands and knees. His arms shook and the desert turned over. "Water," he whispered. He crawled to the woman. "Please."

"The children will be glad to see you." She turned and walked back into the house. The door closed.

Price crawled to the wall. The children had a tub of water. The boy was pushing a toy sailing ship across the surface. His hands were wet. Water sloshed over the rim of the tub and ran on the floor.

The little girl waved to Price. "Hi," she called. "I'm glad you're all right again. We thought you were sick."

Price looked at the water. "Help me."

"We're playing boats."

"Please help me."

The little boy took the boat out of the water and held it up for Price to see. Water ran down his arm. The boat was bright blue. The sail was white.

Price coughed. Blood flecked the wall.

The little boy smiled broadly. "I've got a boat."

"Please."

"Mom got it for me."

"Can't you hear me?" Price looked at the children. "Do you know what I'm saying?"

"Of course it's only a toy."

"Come here." He motioned for them to come over.

The children looked at him curiously.

He motioned again.

They walked over and stood against the wall.

Price got to his feet. It took him a long while and the exertion made his head spin. He leaned his hand on the glass and bent towards the little boy. "Can you hear me?"

The little boy smiled at him. His eyes were warm and he had a dimple on one cheek when he smiled.

Price looked at the girl. "Can you hear me? Nod your head if you can."

The little girl smiled shyly.

"You can't hear me," Price said. "You can't hear me at all, can you?"

The children smiled politely. Friendly.

Price dropped to his knees. "Look," he said. He smoothed out a patch of sand. He drew a circle with his finger. "Sun," he said. He pointed to the sun, then to the circle he had drawn. "Sun," he repeated. He pointed to the sun again, then down to the circle.

The children looked curious.

He drew four smaller circles out from the big one.

"He's drawing," the boy said.

Price pointed to himself. He touched his chest with his hand, then pointed to the third small circle.

"What's he drawing?" the little girl asked.

Price pointed to himself again. He touched his chest and said, "Me." He pointed to the third small circle and said, "Earth."

"It's a ball," the little boy said. "He's drawing a ball."

Price pointed to the third circle. "Earth," he said. "I'm from Earth."

"A ball, a ball," the little girl sang. She jumped up and down and clapped her hands. "He's drawing a ball."

Price ignored her. He pointed to the fourth circle. "Mars," he said.

He pointed to the children. He pointed to the sand. He pointed to the house. He swung his arm, pointing to the expanse of desert, then pointed again to the fourth circle. "Mars," he said.

The children watched him.

He pointed again to himself, then to the third circle. He moved his finger in an arc from the third circle to the fourth one. He jabbed his finger into the fourth circle, crumpling his hand against the sand. "Crashed," he said. He made walking motions with his fingers up to the glass wall and stopped. He looked up at the children.

"Draw a boat," the little boy said.

Price leaned against the wall. The sun was directly overhead now, pouring heat like a giant blowtorch. His thoughts drained away. The sun covered him and devoured him while the desert shimmered and blackness rolled in with sleep and surrender.

He wrenched his mind back. He got up again, swaying weakly on his feet. "Look," he said. He held his hand out in front of him, his fingers bent as though holding a glass. He made turning motions above it with his other hand. He raised his hand to his mouth and pretended to drink. His split lips bled slightly. The blood caked on his mouth and when he swallowed it felt like his throat was being cut.

The children stared blankly.

He repeated the process. "Water," he said.

The little girl tilted her head to one side and surveyed him carefully.

Price pointed to the tub of water. He drew an imaginary pitcher in the air and pretended to pour from it. He drew a glass and pretended to hold it. He pointed again to the tub of water.

The little girl's eyes widened. She beamed. She walked over to the table and picked up a glass half full of water.

Price pulled his mouth into a smile. He pointed to himself.

The little girl nodded triumphantly. She walked back to the wall, holding out the glass like a banner and smiling broadly.

Price opened his black lips and pointed down his throat.

The little girl drank the water.

Price stared incredulously at her. He looked at the empty glass in her hand. "No," he said. "For me." He fell to his knees and pressed his face to the hot glass wall. "Please," he croaked. "Please."

The woman walked into the room. She smiled at Price. "Come on, you kids," she said. "Clean up your room. You can talk later."

"We're talking to our friend, Mummy."

"I know, honey. You can talk to him later. Clean up your room now." She turned to Price and smiled politely. "Those two would talk all day if you let them."

Price pawed at the wall. He was smearing more blood on the glass. "Please," he whispered.

"But it's nice of you to visit."

He coughed violently. A long heaving cough that came from deep inside and blew clotted blood against the back of his teeth.

"You seem to have made a big hit with them."

He fell over sideways. Sand stuck to his mouth like red cement.

"I better get some work done myself."

It was hard to think because his brain was dry and his body felt far away and when he closed his eyes he couldn't feel the sand.

"I'm complaining about the kids," she laughed, "and here I am gabbing myself."

He seemed to be sliding down a long dry tunnel. The sides of the tunnel were made of stucco and they scraped and tore his skin. He looked back up the tunnel and a great black cloud was rushing after him. He went faster and faster and the stucco side tore big pieces of meat out of him that burned but didn't bleed because he was too dry and he was turning over slowly and his face was scraping the tunnel and his mouth wouldn't close because his tongue was too big and no matter how fast he went the black cloud went faster and it was all dry too.

"We'll see you later."

Blackness covered him.

**T**hey watched him for a long while. Finally the woman spoke. "I think he's dead."

"No," the boy said.

"I think so."

"He can't be."

"Stay here. I'll go see."

"He isn't dead."

"I'll go look."

The woman walked out of the house and the children followed her to the doorway. She walked over

to Price. She hooked a foot under him and rolled him on to his back. His head flopped loosely. His tongue protruded and his eyes were vacant.

She bent down and looked closely at him. "He's dead." Her voice was different and she wasn't pretty.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

The little one walked towards Price. His eyes were funny and he didn't look like a little boy any more. His arms were changing, and he didn't have fingers. His skin was becoming slate blue. "That was too quick," he snapped.

"I know."

As the house disappeared, the little one walked over to Price's body and kicked him on the head. He muttered something obscene and kicked him again and again. He rained kicks on Price's head and on

his open mouth and his open sightless eyes.

He kicked him in cold deliberate fury and Price's head bounced and made soggy noises.

The big one pulled him back gently. "He can't feel it anymore," she said, and looked up. The landscape was flickering back to something closer to its reality. There was something like a tree, and something like a hill. The home was gone.

"But what'll we do now?" the little Martian screamed. "There's nothing more to play with."

The big Martian stroked his head and said, "Be patient." She looked up at the sky and smiled softly. "Look," she said, as a distant line of fire streamed down the strange, pale sky. "There's another coming now." **END**

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# WHITE FANG GOES DINGO

by Thomas M. Disch

Illustrated by GAUGHAN

*The aliens didn't enslave men . . . or hurt them . . . or destroy them. They were very fond of Earthmen—as pets!*

**M**y name is White Fang, though of course that is not really my name. At least not any more. Now my name is Dennis White. I like the old name better, but I suppose that comes of having been a

pet. Some people would say that once you've been a pet, once you've grown used to a Leash, you're never quite human again. I don't know about that. Of course, it is more fun. But one can learn not to want it so badly. I did. And this is the story of how I did it. As a puppy.

Ah, how is one to speak of the old times without slipping into the old way of speaking? But am I then to speak like a Dingo? No! The memoirs of a member of Louis XVI's court could not be set down in the rough accents of a sans-culotte — and I must be allowed to write of White Fang as White Fang would have written of himself. For the time being let me leave Dennis White in abeyance — and let me say, without more preamble, that as a puppy I was uncommonly happy.

How should it have been otherwise? I was raised in the best kennels of the solar system. My young body was sportive — and so it sported. My education ranged freely through the humanities, and yet I was never forced beyond my inclinations. I enjoyed the company of my own kind as well as the inestimable pleasures of the Leash. Finally, I was conscious of possessing the highest pedigree. My father was a major artist — perhaps *the* major artist — in a society that valued art above all other things. No little bit of his glory rubbed off on me. Later, in adolescence, a father's fame may cramp the growing ego, but *then* it was enough to know that I was as valuable a pet as there could be. In what else does happiness consist than in this — a sense of one's own value? Not in freedom, surely.

If I had been free in my youth, I would almost certainly not have been so happy.

In fact there *was* a time when I might have been said to be free

(I thought of it then as *neglect*), and I resented my condition bitterly. It happened shortly after I had been orphaned — that is to say, after the Dingoes had made away with my father. I was seven then. But let me set about this in a more chronological fashion:

Let me make a narrative of this.

I suppose I should begin with my parents, Tennyson White and Clea Melbourne Clift. Clea, who would never let us call her Mother, did not marry Daddy, in the usual sense of the word. Like so many women of her generation, the first to grow up under the Mastery, Clea was something of a blue stocking and very jealous of her independence. For Clea to marry and take on the name of White would have been in contradiction to the first article of her faith: that the sexes must be equal in all things.

Neither I nor my older brother Pluto knew how to behave around Clea. She didn't want us to think of her as a mother, but more as a sort of friend of the family. When Daddy disappeared, Clea went off somewhere — outside the solar system — and we never heard from her again. She had taken up with Daddy because of his literary reputation. A lot of women did, but she was his favorite, for the simple reason that she was what a Dingo would call a "knóck-out." Daddy, on the other hand, was sort of thin and pale and poetical. He wore his hair almost as long as hers. I never knew either of them really well.

I think I've already mentioned

that Daddy disappeared when I was seven years old. We were on Earth, Daddy, Pluto, and I, living in the open country near one of the Dingoes' towns. Daddy was researching another book, a sequel to *A Dog's Life*, and he'd go off on long walks without a Leash. Sometimes he would be loose for weeks at a time if his work demanded it. He had to understand what it was to be merely human. So, when the Dingoes got hold of him, the Masters couldn't do anything. They'd lost touch. No body was ever found, but one could assume that the Dingoes had been thorough in disposing of the remains, for the Masters could have resurrected a body from hamburger almost.

Pluto and I were placed in a kennel located on the North Shore of Lake Superior, the Shroeder Kennel, and there we remained for the next three years, and there we were neglected.

In a purely physical sense, we were well cared for. I'll grant that. The Shroeder Kennel (named for a little town that had once occupied that site) had an excellent gymnasium, warm and cold pools, indoor tennis and golf courts, good robotic instructors for all sports, and the kennel rations were prepared with that exquisite simplicity that only the most refined taste can command. Our rooms, both public and private, were spacious, airy, and bright. Naturalness was everywhere, the style of the thing, and it was no less natural for being adjusted to our convenience. Thus, in the summer the air was filtered and cooled,

and in the winter the dome that encompassed the kennel heated us and added extra hours of sunlight to the brief northern days. The dome delimiting the kennels was a mile in diameter, and within its bounds our comforts were secure against the enmity of the Dingoes.

It would have been an ideal existence if only our Master had truly cared for us.

Not that he should have cared. Why should *people* care for dogs or cats or parakeets? But they do, and the dogs and cats and parakeets have come to expect it. They like to be talked to, fondled, taken for walks, and, in general, treated as equals, though it must be evident, even to their limited sensibilities, that they aren't equal; men are immeasurably their superiors, possessing inexplicable powers and engaging in unaccountable pursuits.

The analogy (which I have borrowed from Daddy's novel, *A Dog's Life*) to the relation between Masters and men can be extended almost indefinitely. Mankind cannot presume to understand or equal the Masters. Their nature is so alien to ours that, unassisted, we cannot even perceive them. As nearly as we can know, the Masters are pure electromagnetic phenomena —formed of a "substance" that is neither matter nor energy but rather a potentiality for either. Their power approaches cosmic proportions, and their knowledge approaches omniscience.

Beside them mankind is insignificant and laughable. Considered simply as a field of force, they are, cor-

porately, of a scope and dimension equal at least to the magnetic field of the Earth. In the strictest sense of the word, the Masters are unaccountable. One could only accept them, reverence them, and hope for the best.

The best that one could hope for was the Leash. The Leash, however, is — it was — rather hard to describe: the tides of knowledge that sweep through the mind, the total certainty that it affords, the ecstasy. Naturally, it didn't always reach those proportions. Often it was only a diffuse sense of well-being. But it could be the Beatific Vision. It was not as some say, a telepathic link with the Masters. (Although they could speak to us only when we were Leashed, and their speech was a direct communication from their mind to ours.) It was simply their *touch*, a touch that could transmute our nervous system from base lead to gleaming gold — or scramble a brain into idiocy — with, literally, the speed of lightning.

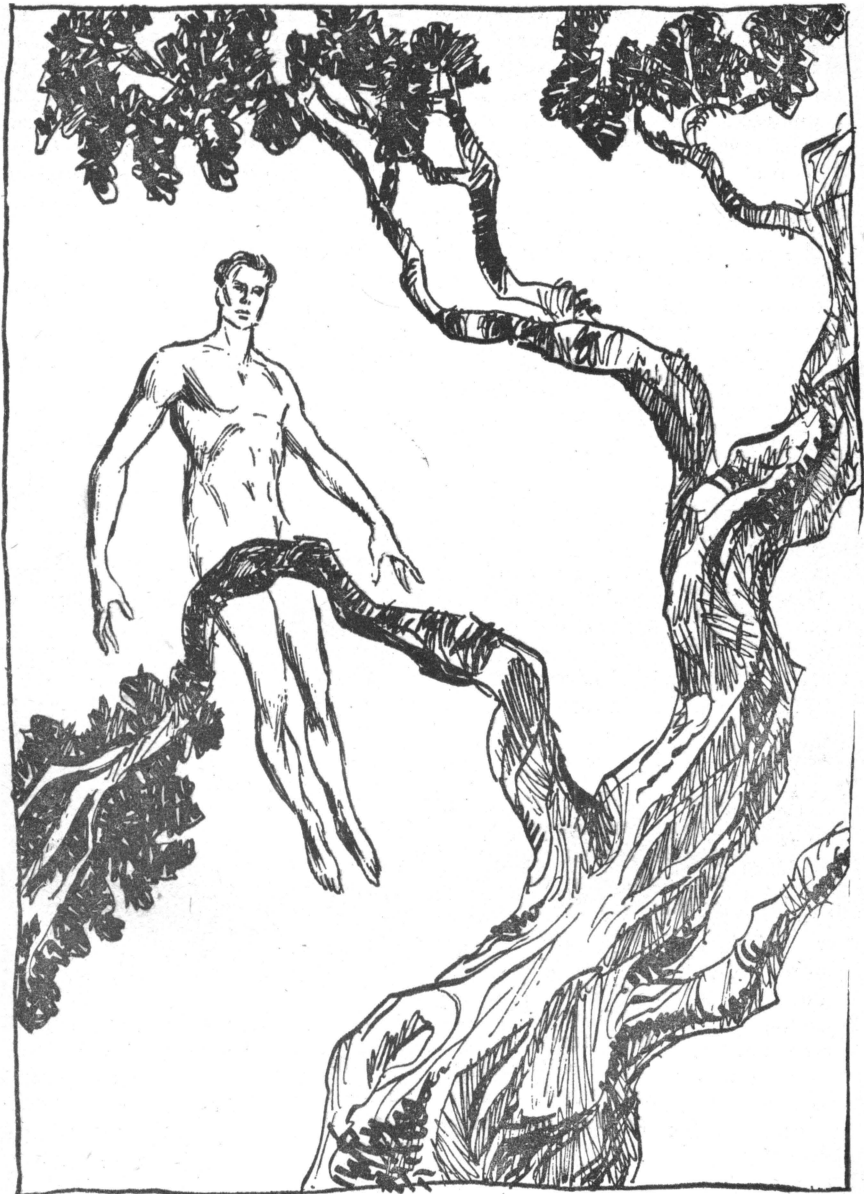
Desirable as the Leash was, one could not coerce it. Like the state of grace, it came as a gift or not at all. And at the Schroeder Kennel it came not at all — or so rarely as to make its general absence only more poignant. Our Master simply did not care; he was not interested enough in his pets to spend his time with them, and so we were left to our own devices. It was a terrible way to grow up.

And so we come to Roxanna Proust.

I don't think Proust was really her last name, any more than my name was White Fang. She had taken the name, because Proust was her idol. She was only eighteen at the time that we entered the Shroeder Kennel, and already the *Remembrance of Things Past* was her passion and pastime.

Roxanna was, *faute de mieux*, our teacher. She taught us French, reading to us from her favorite author, and she taught us German by reading a German translation of Proust. It was a rather eclectic education, but there was no one else with a fraction of Roxanna's talent, special as it was. Most of the pets there were only interested in athletics and flirtation. For my own part, I'll confess that I spent much more time in the gymnasium than I did at my studies. Without the intellectual stimulation and aid of the Leash, literature has not been my natural inclination.

Pluto was different. Pluto loved to read, and, under Roxanna's guidance, he began to write. Not surprisingly, his style was very derivative of Proust's. Later, it was derivative of Joyce, and at last, when he became famous, it was entirely original. Or so I am told. I've never been able to understand him unless I was Leashed, and then, of course, I can understand anything. In fact, if I were to be candid, I would have to admit that my brother and I have always been rather distant. That at least prevented us from being hostile. I understand that Pluto, like our mother, has left the solar system. He is no longer on Earth, in any



case, and I can't say that I've missed him that much.

## II

I have always considered that my life began at the age of ten. Before that age, I remember few events in any detail. From ten on, I think I could reconstruct the happening of each new day if I had to.

The day it would give me most pleasure to reconstruct was the 4th of October, 2023 — a Wednesday. On that day in good weather Roxanna would take Pluto and me out into the country, beyond the dome of the kennel. After a half-hour drive along dirt roads, we would arrive at a deserted farm, where, in the shade of overburdened apple trees, we would pursue our studies, or, if Roxanna felt indulgent toward us, we would explore the old farm buildings. We never went into the house itself, though. The aura of Dingoes still clung to it.

Only years later did Roxanna reveal to me that this was her parents' farm, abandoned during the Great Collapse of 2012, when the economy of those humans who were still holding out against the Mastery fell completely into ruin. The Nelsons (for that was the name on the mailbox — not Proust) had volunteered themselves and their children for the Shroeder Kennel. The children had been accepted, but the parents had been turned away, as by that time most older volunteers were. The Masters had no more need of wild pets, for now they bred their own.

It was principally from rejects like the Nelsons that the society of Dingoes, as we know it today, evolved, and Roxanna herself was not free from the taint (or so I regarded it then) of their wildness. How else was one to interpret these willful visits to the scene of her childhood — visits in which she involved Pluto and me with such blithe disregard for our safety or moral well-being. The countryside was swarming with Dingoes even then (had not I lost my father to them?), and we three pets could have been abused or abducted without fear of reprisals. That our Master should have allowed us to venture so far, Unleashed and running wild, is indicative of the state of affairs at Shroeder Kennel.

It was late in the afternoon, and Roxanna, tired of reading, was lazily reminiscing to Pluto about her country childhood and how different the world had been then. I was above them in the branches of the apple tree, working problems in long division. Suddenly there appeared, suspended in mid-air almost near enough for me to touch, a girl of about my own age. Wisps of heliotrope spiralled about her, and her hair gleamed in the dying sunlight as though it were itself luminescent.

"Hello," she said. "My name is Julie. Don't you want to play?"

I could not reply. I was stunned as much by her loveliness (Yes, I was only ten, but children are not insensible of these things — perhaps not so much as *we* are.) as by the shock of meeting a stranger in those unlikely circumstances.

She took a step toward me, smiling (Julie has always had the loveliest, cheek-dimpling smile), and I realized what would have been immediately evident to any other pet: that it was her Master's unseen presence that supported her. For him, anti-gravity would be a moment's improvisation. But our Master's neglect had made even such commonplaces as flights seem rare to us.

"Aren't you Leashed?" she asked, when she saw that I was not about to leave my branch and meet her halfway.

"No, none of us are."

By this time Roxanna and Pluto had become aware of our visitor, but since they were a good ten feet below Julie and me, it was awkward for them to join the conversation. It was awkward for me, for that matter, but I blustered on.

"Would you like an apple?" I asked, picking one from the abundance about me and offering it to her. She stretched forth her hand, then, with a guilty look, drew it back.

"My Master thinks I'd best not," she explained. "He says that sort of food is for Dingoes. You're not a Dingo, are you?"

"Oh no!" I blushed, though I knew she was only trying to make a joke. There could be no serious doubt of our domestication, for Dingoes wear clothing, while pets (who have better bodies, usually) only dress for formal occasions: the theatre or a pageant.

"Would you like to slip in with me?" She held out her hand, and eagerly I jumped off the branch

and was buoyed up in the gravity belt supporting Julie. I felt the meshes of a Leash close over my mind, and Julie, giggling with delight, leaped into the accommodating air to a height of thirty feet, and hung there, secure as a ping-pong ball suspended by a jet of air.

"Try and catch me!" she shouted and then dashed behind the sagging roof of the old barn.

"What about me?" Pluto protested.

"You're probably too old, but I'll ask her," I promised and disappeared from sight. She led me quite a chase, but it was such a pleasure to be able to fly again that I kept up with her effortlessly.

The Leash that I shared with Julie was loose — that is, it was not so intense that one wished to do no more than contemplate the mysteries of life and Leash. One simply felt euphoric, zesty, and raring to go.

Once I had caught her, I made her explain what she was doing out here at the Nelson farm. It was not, after all, a crossroads. Julie explained that her Master had brought her to Earth to help choose new stock for his kennel in the asteroid belt. My eyes kindled with the hope that she might choose *me*. The kennels outside of the Earth, especially those beyond Mars, were known to be superior to Earthside kennels, and I longed to have a Master who would care for me.

Julie seemed to understand this, for she didn't keep me in suspense. "You will come back with us, won't you?" she asked, and her Master's voice resonated in my mind, echoing her plea: *Won't you?*

Her Master? No — now he was mine!

"Why did you come out *here*?" I asked. "Surely, you don't have time to look at all the pets on Earth."

"Because of who you are."

"Who are we?" I was sincerely puzzled.

"Only the sons of the most famous novelist in the last fifty years. That's all. It's incredible that every kennel in the solar system isn't trying to snap you up."

It was easy at Shroeder Kennels, where Roxanna was the only pet with a literary bent, and that so singularly directed, for Pluto and I to forget the extent of our father's fame. *A Dog's Life* had been, after all, an epoch-making book — like Luther's Bible or *Das Kapital*. Even the Masters had read and admired it. Daddy had won the Nobel Prize, entered the French Academy, and been elected to the American Senate. More than any other person, he had affected the reconciliation of men and the Masters, and it was for that reason that the Dingoes had marked him for vengeance. It was his book, in fact, that had given the Dingoes their name.

The wonder of that novel is that it's told entirely from a dog's point of view — a *real* dog. Before *A Dog's Life*, the Dingoes had used words like "kennel," "Leash," and even "pet" as invective. After Daddy's book, the tables were turned: Daddy's terminology stuck. *Everyone* — that is to say, all the pets — began to name their children after famous dogs. There hasn't been a generation of puppies with stranger

names since the Pilgrim Fathers went off the deep end back in the Seventeenth Century.

Which brings us back to Julie and me. "I've told you my name," she said. "But you haven't told me yours."

"White Fang," I said, proudly.

"White Fang," she repeated, cuddling up to me. "I don't see you as 'White Fang' at all. I'm going to call you Cuddles."

I should have objected then and there, but I was anxious lest I offend Julie and lose my ticket to the asteroids. And so it was that for the next ten years of my life I was known as Cuddles to all my friends.

Within hours of our return to the kennel, Julie's Master had negotiated the transfer of myself and Pluto from the Shroeder Kennel to outer space. Roxanna was very curt in her farewells. It was only natural that she should be disappointed at being left behind, but there was nothing to be done. Her pedigree was unexceptional, and her literary attainments, though they shone in the intellectual night of the Shroeder Kennel, were not really of the first magnitude when you looked at them from a greater distance.

The trip to the asteroids was made that night as we slept. What means our Master employed to transport us, I could not say. Nothing so crude as a spaceship. The Master's technology is a spur-of-the-moment thing, and I will admit, for my own part, that mechanical engineering isn't really that interesting to me.



We woke to the subdued luminescence of kennel walls that we had known for years. The walls shifted to livelier color schemes in response to the quickening neural patterns of our waking minds. It was just like home.

But there was a difference: instead of the relentless drag of Earth-gravity there was a gentle gravitational pulse, a relaxed ebb and flow that seemed to issue from my own heart.

I felt the Leash of my new Master close tighter over my mind (for the next ten years it would never *entirely* desert me, even in sleep), and I smiled and whispered my thanks to him for having brought me away.

Julie was awake now, also, and with a wave of her arm and a flourish of synthetic horn-music, the walls of the kennel dissolved and I beheld the boundless, glowing landscape of the asteroids.

I gasped.

*It is yours*, said a voice in my head that would soon come to seem as familiar as my own.

Hand in hand, Julie and I sailed out over this phantasmagorical playground, and the spheres of heaven played their music for us. Exotic blossoms exploded, like Roman candles, discharging their hoards of rich perfume. Colors wreathed us in abstract, joyous patterns, as the two of us bounded and tumbled through the shifting fields of gravity, like starlings caught in a dynamo.

Can it be that I shall never again enjoy the easy pleasures of that time? When I remember the way I passed through those ten beautiful years,

I wonder if I am truly free or if I may not be, instead, exiled. Nothing, nothing on Earth can compare with the infinite resources of the Masters' pleasure domes.

It was paradise.

Really, it was almost paradise. Illness and pain were banished from our lives, and it might have been (for I know of no instance to disprove it) that, so long as we stayed Leashed, death too had lost its sting. Women no longer brought forth children in sorrow, nor did men eat their bread in the sweat of their brows. Our happiness did not degenerate into boredom, and our pleasures were never dampened by an aftertaste of guilt.

Paradise has a considerable flaw, however, from the narrative point of view. It is anti-dramatic. Perfection doesn't make a good yarn, unless one attempts (as I am given to understand my brother Pluto has attempted, in his more abstruse works) to emulate Dante. So there isn't much for me to tell you, except: *I liked it.*

I liked it; for ten years that was the story of my life.

### III

**I**n the summer of 2037, ten years after our departure, the three of us — Julie, myself, and our Master — were back again on Earth. Julie, in one of her sentimental moods, had wanted to stop by first at the Nelson farm, where we had met. Our Master, as usual, indulged her whim.

We sat, in the lightest of Leashes, beneath our apple tree and mar-

velled at the changes time had wrought not only in ourselves (for we had, after all, passed from puppyhood to maturity in the meantime) but also in the scene about us.

The roof of the barn had fallen in, and in the orchard and surrounding meadows, saplings had taken root and were flourishing. Julie gloried in the Gothic Revival. So great was her passion for returning to the past that she begged our Master to be Unleashed!

"Please," she whined. "Just this once. I feel so anachronistic out here in a Leash."

Our Master pretended not to hear.

"Pretty please," she whined more loudly, though it was much more like a bark by now.

A voice in my head (and in Julie's too, of course) soothed: *There, now, gently. What's this, my darlings, my dears, my very own pets? Why should you wish to throw off your Leashes? Why — you're hardly Leashed at all! Do you want to turn into Dingoes?*

"Yes!" Julie replied. "Just for this afternoon I want to be a Dingo."

I was shocked. Yet I must admit that at the same time I was a little excited. It had been so long since I had been without a Leash, that so primitive an idea appealed to me. I felt a yen for novelty. Or, as the Dingoes would say, freedom is a natural instinct of man.

*If I Unleash you, there's no way for you to call me back. You'll just have to wait till I come back for you.*

"That's all right," Julie assured him. "We won't leave the farm."

*I'll return in the morning, little ones. Wait for me.*

"Oh we will, we will," Julie and I promised antiphonally.

And then he was gone, and our minds stood naked in an alien world. A more vivid pink flushed Julie's cheek, and her eyes sparkled with a sudden, unaccustomed brilliance. I realized that this was probably the first time in her life as a pet — in her whole life, that is — that she has been entirely Unleashed. She was probably feeling tipsy. I was.

"Hello, Earthling," she said. Her voice seemed different, sharper and quicker. She plucked an apple from the branches overhead and polished it on her velvety skin.

"You shouldn't eat that, you know," I said.

"I know." She bit into it, then, with a little giggle, offered the rest of the apple to me. It was rather an obvious literary reference, but I could see no reason to refuse the apple.

I took a large bite out of it. When I saw the other half of the worm that remained in the apple, I began to retch, bringing our little morality play to an abrupt conclusion.

It was Julie who found the pump and got it working. The well water had a distinctly rusty flavor, but it was at least preferable to the taste in my mouth. Then, with my head in Julie's lap and her fingers tousling my hair, I went to sleep, though it was the middle of the day.

When I woke, the heat of the afternoon sun was touching me at every pore and I was damp

with sweat. The wind made an irregular sound in the trees around us, and from the branches overhead, a crow cried hoarsely and took to the air. I watched its clumsy trajectory with an amusement somehow tinged with uneasiness. *This* is what it was like to be mortal.

"We're getting sunburnt," Julie observed placidly. "I think we should go into the house."

"That would be trespassing," I pointed out.

"So much the better," said Julie, for whom the romance of being a Dingo for a day had not yet worn off.

In the farmhouse, dusty strands of adhesive — cobwebs — hung from the ceiling, and the creaking floor was littered with paper that time had peeled from the walls. In the upstairs rooms, Julie found closets and drawers of mildewed clothing, including some cotton dresses that would have been the right size for a ten year old. It was hard to think of Roxanna ever being that small. I felt vaguely guilty to have opened up this window on the past, and, when one of the dresses, rotten with age, came apart in my hands, a little spooky too. I took Julie into another of the upstairs rooms, which contained a broad cushioned apparatus, raised about a yard off the floor. The cushion smelled awfully.

"It's a bed!" Julie said. "I've read about beds."

"So have I," I replied. "In Shakespeare. But these beds smell."

"They must decay, like the clothing."



I sat down on the edge of the bed, and it bounced with a creaking, metallic sound, like the sound of the pump outside. Julie laughed and jumped onto the bed beside me. It groaned, and the groan deepened to a rasp, and the rasp snapped. Julie went right on laughing as the bed collapsed to the floor. Looking at her sprawled out beside me on that quaint apparatus, I became aware of a feeling that I had never experienced before. For, though I had often made love to Julie, I had never felt quite this urgent about it. Undoubtedly, this was a result of being Unleashed.

"Julie," I said, "I'm going to bite you."

"Grr," she growled playfully.

"Arf," I replied.

We spent the night in the farmhouse amid creakings and groanings of old wood and ominous scurrings in the walls. We were up with the sun and we went, shivering, directly out of doors to wait beneath the apple tree. We were cold and we were hungry, and swarms of hostile, buzzing insects rose from the dew-drenched grass to settle on our raw skins and feed on our blood. I killed three or four, but the senseless things continued to attack us, quite oblivious to their danger. I began to understand why humans had always worn clothes before the advent of the Masters.

The sun had risen nearly to noonday, when Julie finally turned to me and asked: "What do you suppose is wrong, Cuddles?"

It was useless by now to pretend

that nothing was wrong, but I could only answer her question with a look of dismay. Perhaps we were being punished for asking to be Unleashed. Perhaps —

But how could we presume to interpret the Masters actions, especially such irresponsible, inconceivable, and thoughtless actions as leaving two pedigreed pets defenseless in an alien world among dingoes!

When our hunger grew extreme, we gorged on apples, cherries, and sour plums, not even bothering to look for wormholes. Through that afternoon and into the night, we waited, but at last the chill and darkness of the night forced us into the house.

The next morning was spent in more useless waiting, though this time we had the prudence to wear clothing — pants and jackets of rough blue cloth and rubberized boots. Almost everything else had rotted beyond repair. Our Master did not return.

"Julie," I said at last, "we're on our own. Our Master has abandoned us." She began to cry, not making much noise about it, but the tears rolled down her cheeks in a steady stream faster than I could kiss them away.

But for all that, I must confess that Julie adapted to our new condition more readily than I. She enjoyed the challenges of that archaic and almost Dingo-like existence. Every day while I went to a high hill in the vicinity to call, hopelessly and to no effect, to our Master, to *any* Master, Julie busied herself about the old house, clearing the

floors, dusting, washing, airing out the musty furniture and decaying mattresses, and experimenting with the interesting new vegetables that grew among the weeds of a forgotten garden. My visits to the hillside became less frequent after the first week. I was convinced that our Master would never return to us. The thought of his cruelty and indifference passed quite beyond belief.

Helping Julie at odd jobs around the farm, I began to have a certain respect for the pre-Mastery technology of Earth. I discovered and repaired one mechanical device that was especially useful: a rough stone wheel three feet in diameter and three inches thick that was set into rotary motion by a foot pedal. By holding a piece of metal to the revolving wheel, the machine could be made to give off sparks, and these in turn ignited dry scraps of wood. The fire thus produced could be conserved in various engines in the farmhouse. Fire had an immense utility, but since I assume my readers are familiar with it, I will not make my digression any longer.

I only mention in passing that on the night of my discovery, Julie, sitting by me in front of a roaring log fire, looked at me with real admiration! A look that I returned — for she was very lovely in the firelight, lovelier than she had even been before, it seemed. The firelight softened the contours of her face, until I was aware only of her relaxed, easy smile and the brightness of her eyes, a brightness that did not need to borrow its brilliance from

the fire but seemed to issue from her very being.

"Prometheus," she whispered.

"My own Pandora," I returned, and a scrap of old verse popped into my mind, at once comforting and terrible in its implications. I recited it to Julie in a low voice:

*Your courteous lights in vain  
you waste,  
Since Juliana here is come;  
For she my mind has so dis-  
placed,  
That I shall never find my  
home.*

Julie shivered theatrically. "Cuddles," she said, "we've got to find our way home."

"Don't call me Cuddles," I said in, for me, a rough manner. "If you won't call me White Fang, stick to Prometheus."

#### IV

Day followed day with no sign of our Master's return. The longer we stayed at the farm, the more inevitable discovery became. On my trips to the hillside I had sometimes noticed clouds of dust rising from the country roads, and though I was careful to keep under cover, I knew that luck alone and merely luck had prevented our capture so far. My imagination recoiled from what would become of us if we were to fall into the hands of Dingoes. I remembered my father, and it was not a memory to inspire confidence.

Therefore I determined that Julie

and I must find our way to the Schroeder Kennel on foot, where, though we might not be so happy as we had been in the asteroids, we would at least be secure. But I had no idea of how to get there. Years ago when Roxanna had driven us to the farmhouse, she had taken a circuitous route, in a vaguely south-western direction, which I had never troubled to learn. In any case, it was not wise to walk along the roads.

I renewed my treks through the nearby woods, searching for a signpost, something to guide us back to civilization. At last a sign was given to me: a hill rose on the other side of a marsh, on the crest of that hill was an electric powerline!

Where there was electricity there would be Masters.

In 1970 when the Masters had first manifested themselves to mankind, they had insisted that they be given complete authority over all electric plants, dams, dynamos, and radio stations. Without in any way interfering with their utility from a human standpoint (indeed, they effected major improvements). The Masters transformed this pre-existent network into a sort of electromagnetic pleasure spa.

In time, of course, their additions and refinements exceeded mere human need or comprehension. Human labor could manufacture devices according to the Masters' specifications that human understanding would never be able to fathom. But even human labor became obsolete as the Masters—in themselves, a virtually unlimited power supply—stayed on and took things over,

freeing man from the drudgery of the commonplace that has been his perennial complaint. Freeing, to be more exact, everyone who agreed to become a pet.

Although in many respects, the Masters' innovations had superceded the primitive technology of the 1970's, they still maintained, largely for the benefit of the Dingoes, a modified system of electric powerlines, lacing the entire world in arcane geometrical patterns that only the Masters could understand.

It was to the power lines that the Masters came to bathe and exercise, and so it was to the power lines that Julie and I must go. Even if there was no way to reach the Masters as they flocked back and forth in the wires overhead, we could follow the lines to some generator or powerhouse, perhaps the one that adjoined the Schroeder Kennel, perhaps one elsewhere, for kennels were invariably located near power stations.

And, once we reached the powerline, it would be a safe journey. No Dingo would dare trespass into the very heart of the Masters' domain.

We prepared for the trip in minutes. While Julie improvised knapsacks, I went to the toolshed. There was an antique weapon there, a rusty wedge of iron mounted on a long wooden handle. I tested it out on the floor of the shed and with a little practice I could swing it with lethal force and fair accuracy. If it splintered Dingoes half so well as it smashed pine boards, it would serve my purpose admirably. Grimly, I refined upon its murderous proper-

ties. I had noticed that the spark-producing machine would put a fine edge on metal that was held against it at the proper angle. After patient experimentation, I had so sharpened the iron blade that the merest touch would sliver flesh. Now, I thought, let the Dingoes come!

We set off before noon, neither of us in the best of spirits: Julie was wistful and melancholic at leaving the farm (though she agreed we had no other choice), and I was nervous and apprehensive. From the hill from which I had espied the powerline, we struck out into a wood of scrub pine, birch, and balsam. In the woods, there was no way to estimate our progress. The sun can be used as a compass, but it makes a poor speedometer. We walked, and when it seemed that we had walked twice, three times the distance to the power line, we kept on walking. Julie became petulant; I became angry. Then she grew angry and I sulked. But always while we were walking. The brush caught at our pant legs, and the mosquitos nipped at our necks. The mud at the edge of marsh about which we were forced to detour sucked at our boots. And we walked.

The sun, striated by long, low, wispy clouds hung huge and crimson at the horizon behind us; before us a pale sliver of moon peeped over the crest of a hill—and on the hill, black against the indigo of the sky, stood the powerline.

Julie dropped her pack and ran up the hill. "Masters," she cried, "Masters, we've come. Leash us.

Make us yours again. Bring us home."

The powerline stood stark and immobile, wires swaying gently in the breeze. Julie embraced the wooden pole and screamed at the unhearing wires: "Master, your pets have come back to you. Why did you leave us. But we've come back. We forgive you. We love you. MASTERS!"

"They don't hear you," I said softly.

Julie stood up, squaring her shoulders bravely, and joined me where I had remained at the foot of the hill. There were no tears in her eyes. But her lips were pressed together in a mirthless, unbecoming smile.

"I hate them," she pronounced in a clear voice. "With my whole being, I *hate* them!" Then she fell into my arms in a dead faint.

As twilight deepened to night, I stood guard over Julie and watched with amazement and renewed hope the great shafts of light that streamed from the northern horizon. They glowed whitely in the black sky, dimming the stars as they shot out, dissolved, and re-formed.

The Northern Lights. Aurora Borealis.

It was there especially that the Masters loved to play and relax. They felt at home among the electrons of the Van Allen Belt and where it curved in to touch the Earth's atmosphere at the magnetic poles, they followed it, controlling the ionization of the air, structuring those pillars of light that men have always wondered at to conform to the elaborate rules of their

supravisual geometry. These shifting patterns were the supreme delight of the Masters, and it was precisely because of the strength of Earth's Van Allen Belt that they had originally been drawn to this planet. They had only bothered to concern themselves with mankind after a number of nuclear explosions had been set off in the Van Allen Belt in the 1960's.

The aurora that night was incredibly beautiful, and so I knew that the Masters were still on Earth, living and flaming for their pets—their poor, lost, maltreated pets—to see.

It was a cold flame, and very remote.

"Your courteous lights in vain you waste," I muttered.

Julie, who has always been a light sleeper, stirred. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, probably too sleepy still to remember what she was supposed to be sorry about.

"It's all right. We can find them tomorrow," I said, "and tomorrow and tomorrow." Julie smiled and slid by imperceptible degrees back into sleep.

The next day we followed the lines to the north. They ran along an old asphalt road, scarred with fissures and upheavals, but still easier to travel than the rank brush on either side.

A faded sign gave the distance to Schroeder as 22 miles. Using the road (for the wires overhead were sufficient protection, as we thought, against the Dingoes), we could hope to reach the kennel by midafternoon. Regularly we passed deserted

farmhouses set back from the road and, twice, the road widened and the ruins of houses were set closer together: a town. Here the poles would branch off in all directions, but the main powerline followed its single course toward Schroeder. The poles were of rough pine, stained to a reddish-brown by creosote, one just like another, until—

Julie noticed it as we neared Schroeder. Running up and down the poles were thin silvery lines that glinted metallically in the sunlight. On closer inspection, the lines formed vertical chains of decorative elements in simple repeating patterns. One common design of overlapping circles linked in series by straight lines, so:



Another was a simple zigzag pattern:



The most frequent designed resembled a circuiting diagram of dry cells in series:



In fact, they were *all* circuiting diagrams!

It was too crude decoratively and such nonsense from any other point of view that I knew it could not be the work of the Masters. No, there was something barbaric about these markings that suggested Dingoes.

But what Dingo would dare approach this near the sanctuary of



the Masters? The Kennel must be only a few hundred yards off. I began to have misgivings about our security. Before I could properly begin to savor this danger, another had presented itself.

"Cuddles!" Julie screamed. "My God, the power station!"

I was already at her side. A cyclone fence that ran some hundred feet along the road prevented our entrance to the substation, but it made no difference, for it was nothing but a rubble heap now. I-beams, gnarled and twisted like the limbs of denuded oaks, stood in black silhouette against the light blue of the afternoon sky. The pylons that had fed the high tension wires into the substation lay on the ground like metal Goliaths, quite dead. The wires that had led out from the station had been snapped and hung inert from the top of the cyclone fence, where now and again a breeze would stir them.

"It's been bombed," I said, "and that's impossible."

"Dingoes?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But how *could* they?"

It made no sense. So primitive an attack as this couldn't succeed against the Masters when the whole rich arsenal of 20th Century science had failed. Oh, the nuclear blasts in the Van Allen Belt had *annoyed* them. But I doubted then and I doubt now whether man has it in his power actually to kill one of the Masters.

How could it be done? How do you fight something without dimensions, without even known equations

that might give a symbolic approximation to its character? Not, surely, by bombing minor power stations here and there. Not even by bombing them all. The Masters transcended mere technology.

Inside the fence, from somewhere in the tangle of gutted machinery, there was a moan. A woman's voice reiterated the single word: "Masters, Masters . . ."

"That's not a Dingo," Julie said. "Some poor pet has been caught in there. Why, Cuddles, do you realize this means *all* the pets have been abandoned?"

We made our way through a hole in the fence sheared open by a fallen pylon. Kneeling a few feet from that hole, her face turned away from us, was the moaning woman. She was using the blasted crossbeam of the pylon as a sort of *prie-dieu*. Her hair, though tangled and dirty, still showed traces of domestication. She was decently naked, but her flesh was discolored by bruises and her legs were badly scratched. Confronted with this pathetic ruin of a once handsome pet, I realized for the first time how terribly *wild* Julie looked: dressed in the most vulgar clothes, her hair wound up in a practical but inartistic bun and knotted with strips of cloth, her lovely feet encased in clumsy rubber boots. We must have looked like Dingoes.

The poor woman stopped moaning and turned to confront us. Her face expressed, in order, the ascending degrees of amazement, ending in blank amaze.

"Father," she said, aghast.

"Roxanna!" I exclaimed. "Is it you?"

## V

It was she. We were the longest time calming her and explaining that, quite the opposite to being her father, I was only little White Fang, grown up to a man's estate.

"But your clothes," she said. "I'd know that jacket anywhere. And those boots with the red rubber circle around the rim."

Briefly as I could I explained how our Master had brought us to the farm and deserted us, and how we had to take clothes from the farmhouse—her parents' clothes, as it happened.

"And did your brother Pluto come back with you?"

"No. He's left the solar system, the last I heard."

Roxanna's expression underwent a subtle change, as though she had begun to make calculations. The conversation lapsed awkwardly.

"Have you read Pluto's book?" Julie asked.

"I started it, but I couldn't understand it." She sighed. "My reading's fallen off lately. Even Proust doesn't seem as interesting as he used to. And then, of course, there's been this revolution . . ."

"Ah yes," I said, "the revolution. Would you tell us some more about that?"

Roxanna's account was none too clear, having been assembled from eavesdropped conversations and uninformed conjecture. Even the word *revolution* proved to be misleading.

I've written here not the garbled story Roxanna told us then, but the facts as they were later to be established by the courts and newspapers.

July had been a month of unusual sunspot activity. The Masters, anticipating the dynamic auroral displays that follow such periods, had flocked to Earth—many, like our Master, bringing their pets with them. Shortly after our arrival, during the afternoon that Julie and I had been Unleashed, a solar prominence of extraordinary intensity had erupted from the center of a sunspot cluster and knocked the Masters out of commission.

It was like a house that's been drawing too heavily on its current. Everything was turned on: the refrigerator, the stove, the air conditioner, the iron, the toaster, the coffee pot, the flood lights, the television, and the model railroad in the basement. Then *Blat!*, lightning strikes and there's one hell of a short circuit. Lights out, tubes popped, wires burnt, motors dead.

The Masters weren't dead, of course. They're made of stronger stuff than toasters. But while they convalesced . . .

Roxanna herself had been spared the worst of it, since she hadn't been in the Shroeder Kennel when the lights went out. But she'd seen it happen. In a flash (literally, a flash), the entire kennel—walls, floors, even the anti-gravitic furniture had disappeared.

It was as though they had existed only as an idea in the mind of God, and then God had gone and forgotten them. Pets, who had been soar-

ing balletically in the vast spaces of the gymnasium, soared now in vaster spaces. Everyone who had been in the Kennel suddenly found himself plunging down to the ground, overpowered by the Earth's gravity, accelerating.

The carnage had been terrible. The Schroeder Kennel, such as it was, was thrown into panic. But the worst was still before them. The Dingoes, quicker to realize what had happened than the distracted pets, had overrun the breeding farms and kennels everywhere. In the first fires of revolutionary excitement, they were ruthless. Puppies were taken from their mothers, to be raised in the homes of Dingoes; the men, any who resisted, were ruthlessly slaughtered before the eyes of their mates, and the women . . . Well, what would one expect of Dingoes?

At this point Roxanna broke into tears, unable to go on. I noticed then that her body was covered with small black-and-blue marks, too tiny to have resulted from blows, but too numerous to be accidental. I insisted that Roxanna finish her tale.

"Oh, I hate him!" she said, not loudly but quite expressively nonetheless. "I hate him! God, how I hate him!"

All in all, it took Roxanna the better part of two hours to tell this story, for she had a way of veering off into digressions that would have been the delight of any admirer of *Tristram Shandy*, though, for my own part, I am inclined to be more straightforward. In fact, her divaga-

tions had begun to distress me considerably, as soon as I realized that the vicinity was still swarming with Dingoes, and that Roxanna was living with the chief of them!

"Roxanna," I said, trying to get her to her feet, "Julie and I are going to help you to escape. And we'd better start right away."

"It's too late," Roxanna said with a sigh in which the resignation was not unmixed with a little pleasure. Too long allegiance to such a master as Proust had finally taken its toll on Roxanna's character, and, though I may anticipate my story by mentioning the word here, I should like to say it and have done. Roxanna, sadly, was something of a masochist.

"Roxanna," I said, more firmly now, "you *must* come with us."

"Get your own bitch, Master," came a good-natured bellow of a voice from not too far away. With a sinking heart, I faced the intruder, a red-faced hulk of flesh many sizes too large for the khakis he wore. He stood on the other side of the fence, arms akimbo and grinning broadly. He held what looked like a glass fishing rod in his meaty hand. "The name's Schwartz — Bruno Schwartz. I'm the head of the RIC in these parts. We're repatriating these damn pets. Now, come on home, Rocky, old girl. Your master calls." He laughed.

So this was a Dingo! For the moment I was safe, for he obviously mistook me for a Dingo too, and perhaps I might have escaped if I had let him go on believing it. But I was too angry.



"You are not Roxanna's Master, and she is not going with you."

"The hell you say!"

"Please," Roxanna pleaded. "I must go to him." But her body didn't protest; she was limp with fear. I pushed her behind me and picked up my axe from the ground.

Bruno's smile broadened. "What are you, anyhow? Some kind of pet?"

"Dingo!" I said with the utmost contempt.

Bruno reached a hand behind his back and made adjustments on an apparatus strapped there. It was the size of one of our knapsacks. Then he climbed through the hole in the fence, brandishing the long, flexible pole.

"Axes!" he scoffed. "Next thing you know someone will invent the bow and arrow."

I advanced toward the Dingo, who stood now within the fence, my axe readied and murder in my heart, as they say. With my left hand I held to the metal frame of the fallen pylon, using it as a crutch. My knees were very weak.

Bruno flicked the end of the glass fishing rod against the pylon. There was a spark and my mind reeled.

**I** was sitting on the ground. I could see Bruno above me between white flashes of unconsciousness. I swung at him wildly. The axe hit the pylon with a dull *thunk*.

He flicked the pole at me again. It touched my left leg at the knee. The shock tore through my body and wrenched a cry from my lips.

"Good stuff, huh, Jack? Great

for the circulation. If you're interested in mechanical things, it's real easy to make. It's a prod pole. Prod poles were meant for cattle, but they work on most any animal."

He flicked it again, tracing a line of pain across my neck. I screamed in agony—I couldn't help it.

"The fishpole was my idea. It handles easier this way."

He let the tip of the pole play over my right arm. Every shred of consciousness that remained to me was in my hand. I clenched the axe handle until the pain in my hand was worse than the flashes of pain that tore through my whole body—until there was no consciousness left.

When I woke (seconds later? Minutes? I don't know), I could hear Roxanna's hysterical laughter. Bruno had finished with her. Julie's voice, pitched so high that I could hardly recognize it, was saying *stay away*, and then, a little sharper still, *Stay away!*

There was a sparking noise and her scream. "White Fang!" she called. "Oh, Mastery—*White Fang!*"

She had called me *that!* Not Cuddles, not Prometheus. White Fang! I sprang to my feet, and the axe was just part of my hand now. I felt, as never before, even when I was Leashed, totally alive and aware, absolutely sure of myself. My body was a living flame.

Bruno had caught hold of Julie. He heard me scrambling over the wreckage of the station and turned around just in time for the axe to come crashing down across his chest.

I hadn't meant to draw blood. I

had only wanted to smash the power pack strapped to his back.

There was a terrible gush of blood from the chest wound, thick and winy. The axe in my hand was covered with blood. It was horrible. I had never seen anyone bleeding like this before, never.

It was horrible! The blood. The thought that I had done this—even the sight of it—was too much, and I collapsed onto Bruno's fallen body.

The last thing I remember was Roxanna's tear-streaked face as she rushed forward to take the fallen Dingo in her arms.

## VI

Though my bed was comfortable, the walls of the room antiseptically white, and my meals thoroughly good, I suspect that I spent the next week in a prison, not a hospital. The guard who brought my food would not speak to me, and I was not allowed to read. My only diversion from anxiously wondering what was in store for me was looking down at the semi-deserted streets four stories below.

I did not know what city this was nor how I had come here. There was some faint recollection of sitting by another, smaller window and staring with dismay at the laboring propeller without, desperately wishing my Master had been there to tend to its rustic operation—but perhaps that was only one of the nightmares I had so frequently then.

I knew that the few people I saw on the streets, the women in long,

ungainly dresses and the men in unseasonably heavy suits, must be Dingoes. And though I had never seen Dingoes in such close proximity before, their dress and behavior was so uniformly dull that I soon grew tired of observing them and began, instead, to count the cars that went by.

This wasn't so boring as you might think, for the various trucks, jeeps, and tractors still in use among the Dingoes (rarely if ever did one see a car) presented a beautiful study in comparative ruination. From the way they roared and sputtered and spewed out black clouds of noxious gas it was obvious that the Dingoes had abandoned heavy industry for decades. These were antiques.

They were usually of an official nature, and those same insignia which I had seen scrawled on the telephone poles outside of Schroeder were painted on the sides of the trucks or on banners that streamed from the jeeps' antennae. I was reminded of the heraldic devices of some crusading army: Resistor statant, sable on a field of gules; diode dormant, on a quartered field, ermine and vert.

To my surprise, the city was strongly illuminated at night. Either the Dingoes had an independent source of electrical power (which seemed unlikely) or the Masters had the power stations back in operation and were reestablishing their dominance. For a moment the chemistry of hope jangled my nerve ends, but I quickly recollected where exactly I was, and the hope fizzled.

After a week in this limbo, I re-

ceived my first visitor. It was Julie, but a Julie so altered in appearance that I thought at first she was a Dingo spy in disguise. Prison does develop one's paranoid tendencies.

She was wearing a high-necked, long-sleeved, floor length dress in the Dingo style and her beautiful hair was concealed by an ungainly cork helmet such as I had seen on several persons passing below my window.

"Julie!" I exclaimed. "What have they done to you?"

"I've been repatriated." She wasn't able to raise her eyes to look into mine, and her whole manner was one of unnatural constraint. No doubt, this could be accounted for by the presence of the armed guard who was watching us from the open doorway.

"You mean they've forced you to—"

"Nobody's forced me to do anything. I just decided to become a Dingo. They're really much nicer than I thought they'd be. They're not all like Bruno. And even he's not so bad—once you get to know him."

"My God, Julie!"

"Oh, don't be upset. That's not what I meant. Bruno's too much in love with Roxanna to think of bothering me."

"That isn't what I meant."

**B**ut Julie went blithely on. "They're going to get married as soon as she's out of the hospital. On the airplane coming here, he was delirious and he told me all about himself. I can't say I understood much of it. Do you know that he

actually *likes* you? He does. There he was all bandaged up, lying on the stretcher, and he said, 'I wasn't smashed like that since God knows when. Good man! We'll get along, White Fang and me.' I thought it was just the delirium, but he was serious. He wants you to visit the both of them as soon as you can."

"And Roxanna's going to marry him?"

"Yes. And she's very mad at you. For hurting Bruno."

"But I was trying to protect her!"

The story that Julie at last unfolded, in her rather scattered way was this: Roxanna, when she saw me strike Bruno with the axe, suddenly decided that she was in love with her tormentor, and her new-found love was every bit as strong as the hatred she had expressed only minutes before. In the heat of the moment, she had been almost angry enough to use my axe on me, but Julie and the Dingoes who had been drawn to the scene had been able to stop her. They didn't stop her from revealing that I was the son of Tennyson White, a fact that Roxanna was sure would lead to my summary execution, since she had often heard the story of how Daddy had been done in by the Dingoes. But instead we'd been shipped off to St. Paul, where the Dingoes had their headquarters in the old State Capitol Building.

What they intended to do with me now, Julie would not say, even if she knew. I had my own grim suspicions.

Julie spent the rest of her visit trying to justify the haste with which

she had allowed the Dingoes to repatriate her, and since she had no apparent excuse but expediency, it was rather hard going.

At last I interrupted her: "Julie, please don't talk on about it. I quite understand that you've had to disassociate yourself from me. Heaven only knows what they intend should happen to me, but there's no reason it should happen to you as well. Perhaps they mean to use me as a hostage. Perhaps they mean something worse. In either case, you're lucky to be rid of me." I was just beginning to hit my stride, and no doubt I would have brought myself to the point of tears, when Julie started to giggle.

To giggle! She tittered and snorted and snuffled like someone who can't keep a joke, and she left the room bent double with the pain of holding back her laughter.

Hysteria, of course. It was a very sad thing to see the girl you love in such a condition and to be unable to help.

**W**ithin an hour of Julie's departure, I was removed from my cell and conducted to an unmarked limousine in perfect working condition.

I did not know where it was taking me, for the curtains were drawn in the back seat, but shortly we found ourselves in a large and largely vacant underground parking area. Then, after a labyrinth of staircases, corridors, guards, and passwords, I at last found myself alone in front of an imposing mahogany desk.

The desk and all the appointments

of this room testified to the consequence of their possessor. In a subsistence economy like that of the Dingoes, luxury is a potent symbol.

My attention was especially drawn to the portrait that hung over the desk. Done in the mock-primitive style popular in the late sixties of the last century, it slyly exaggerated those features of the subject which were most suggestive of the raw and barbarous. His stomach, though monumental itself, was seen from a perspective that magnified its bulk. The face was crudely colored, particularly the nose, which was a florid, alcoholic crimson. The violet-tinged lips were at once cynical and voluptuary. The picture was the perfect archetype of the Dingo.

Yet, perhaps not perfect, for the eyes shone with an intelligence and good will that seemed to contradict the overall impression of brutishness. This one dissonance added to the archetype that touch of *individual* life which only the best portraitists have ever been able to achieve.

I was still engaged in studying this painting (and really, it had the strangest fascination for me) when its original stepped into the room and came forward to shake my hand.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, but my time hasn't been my own ever since that damn sunspot."

When he had finished shaking my hand, he did not immediately release it, but, keeping it in his, looked me over appraisingly. "You'll have to get rid of that name of yours, you know. White Fang just won't do. We Dingoes as you call us, don't like doggish names. Your proper name

is Dennis White, isn't it? Well, Dennis, welcome to the revolution."

"Thank you but . . ."

"But who am I? I'm the Grand High Diode. As far as you're concerned, that means vice-president. Are you interested in politics?"

"Pets don't have to be. We're free."

"Ah, freedom!" The Grand High Diode made an expansive gesture, then plopped into the seat behind the desk. "Your Master takes care of everything for you and leaves you so perfectly free. Except that you can't taste anything from the good-and-evil tree, why, there's nothing that isn't allowed you."

He glowered at me dramatically, and I had time to compare the portrait with the portrayed. My admiration for the artist grew by leaps and bounds.

"The Masters appeared two-thirds of a century ago. In that time, *human* civilization has virtually disappeared. Our political institutions are in shambles; our economy is little more than bartering now; there are practically no artists left."

"Among Dingoes perhaps. But under the Mastery, civilization is flourishing as never before in man's history."

"Cows were never more civilized than when we bred them."

I smiled. "You're playing with words."

"Perhaps you'd rather not argue."

"I'd *rather* argue. If it keeps me away from the hangman—or whoever you employ for such purposes."

"Perhaps you can avoid him altogether. Perhaps, Dennis, I can con-



vince you to become a Dingo?" The man's thick, violet lips distended in a wolfish grin. His eyes, which were, like his eyes in the portrait, vivid with intelligence, glittered with a strange sort of mirth.

I tried my best to look disdainful. "Isn't it rather late to join? I should think that most of the carnage must be over by now. You'll be ready to be defeated any day now."

"Oh, we'll probably be defeated, but a good revolutionary can't let that worry him. A battle that isn't against the odds would hardly be a battle at all. The carnage, I'll admit, is unfortunate."

"And unjustifiable as well."

"Then I won't bother to justify it. Dirty hands is one of the prices you pay in becoming a man again."

"Are you fighting your revolution just so you can feel guilty about it?"

"For that—and for the chance to be our own Masters. Guilt and sweat and black bread are all part of being human. Domestic animals are always bred to a point where they're helpless in the state of nature. The Masters have been breeding men."

"And doing a better job of it than man ever did."

"That, I might point out, is exactly the view a dachshund would take."

"Then let me put in a good word for dachshunds. I prefer them to wolves. I prefer them to Dingoes."

"Do you? Don't make up your mind too quickly, or it may cost you your head."

And, with this threat, my incred-

ible inquisitor began to chuckle. His chuckle became a pronounced laugh, and the laugh grew to be a roar. It occurred to me that the gleam in his eye might as well have been madness as intelligence.

Suddenly I was overcome by a desire just to have done. "My mind is made up," I announced, when he had stopped laughing.

"Then you'll make a declaration?"

Apparently, he had taken the exact opposite of the meaning I had intended.

"Why should you care which side I'm on?" I demanded angrily.

"Because a statement from you—from the son of Tennyson White—with the strength of that name behind it—would be invaluable in the cause of freedom."

Very deliberately I approached the mahogany desk where the man was sitting, wreathed in a fatuous smile, and very deliberately I raised my hand and struck him full in the face.

Instantly the room was filled with guards who pinned my arms behind my back. The man behind the desk began to chuckle.

"You beast!" I shouted. "You Dingo! You have the conscience to kidnap and murder my father, and then you *dare* ask me to make you a declaration of support! I can't believe—if you think that—"

I'm afraid that I went on raving like that for a little while. And as I raved that incredible man lay sprawled on the top of his desk and laughed until he had lost his breath.

"White Fang," he managed at last. "That is to say, Dennis, my dear

boy. excuse me. Perhaps I've carried this a little far. But you see— I am your father. I'm not murdered in the least."

## VII

The next week went by at a pace that would have been nightmarish if I hadn't been so giddily, busily happy. First off, I married Julie. Daddy was adamant about that. He explained how Dingoos, especially those in the public eye, have to appear very monogamous. I had no objection to marriage, and if monogamy was necessary, there was no one I would rather have been monogamous with than Julie. She entered into the spirit of things with enthusiastic atavism, and I suspect now that part of Daddy's insistence had had its origin in my bride.

Still it was a nice wedding. Hy-men's candle never burned brighter than on the day that our hands were joined over the glowing vacuum tube on the altar of the renovated power station.

We had our first quarrel an hour later when she told me that she'd known about Daddy and the test he was preparing for me on the day that she had come to visit me at the jailhouse. But the quarrel ended as soon as Julie had pointed out that, since I'd passed the test so well, I had no cause for anger. I hate to think what would have happened, however, if I'd agreed to make the "declaration" that Daddy had proposed.

From the first, Julie and I were

celebrities among the Dingoos. At a steady succession of lunches, dinners, and dances, we played the part of refugees from the "tyranny of the Masters, grateful for our new-found freedom." That's a quote from the speech Daddy wrote for me to deliver on such occasions. It always drew applause. Dingoos have no taste.

While I acted my role as a model revolutionary, I carried on another more significant drama inwardly. Had it been merely a contest between filial piety and my loyalty to the Masters, I would not have hesitated long, for filial piety is negligible when, for seventeen years, you have presumed your father dead.

But mine had been no ordinary father. He had been Tennyson White, and he had written *A Dog's Life*. Now I discovered there was a sequel to that book.

I read through *The Life of Man* in one sitting of fifteen hours' duration. It was one of the most shattering experiences in my life. In fact, right at this moment, I can't remember any others to compare.

Anyone who's read it realizes the difficulty one faces trying to describe it. It's got a little bit of everything: satire, polemic, melodrama, farce. After the classic unity of *A Dog's Life*, the sequel strikes at one's sensibilities like a jet of water from a high-pressure hose. It begins with the same light irony, the same subdued wit, but gradually — it's hard to say just when — the viewpoint shifts. Scenes from the first novel are repeated *verbatim*, but now its

pleasantries have become horrors. Allegory gives way to a brutal, damning realism; and every word of it seemed an accusation aimed directly at me.

After the first reading, I had no more distinct memory of it than I would have had of a hammer blow. And so I entirely overlooked the fact that *The Life of Man* is autobiography from first to last.

My father Tennyson White belonged to the first generation of men who grew up away from Earth. His first visit to his native planet was at the age of twenty, and it was almost a disaster.

Stricken with a virus infection (those were the days before the Masters had quite mastered all the intricacies of their pets' physiology), Daddy had been abandoned to a rather second-rate hospital, not unlike the Shroeder Kennel in its indifference to the pets who were put up there. Daddy was bedridden for one year, time enough to lose his faith in the Mastery.

Time enough, also, for him to draw up the outlines for *both* of his novels. Time enough to contact important Dingoos and map out with their aid a program for revolution. *A Dog's Life* was to be the overture to that program.

Many authors have been accused of corrupting youth and debasing the moral coinage of their times. Probably none have ever set about it so deliberately as Daddy.

His novel was a time-bomb disguised as an Easter egg and planted right in the middle of the Masters'

basket. It was a Trojan horse; it was a slow-working acid that nibbled at the minds of the pets — just a mild, esthetic tickle at first, then as it worked in deeper, an abrasive that scarred them with guilt.

For men are not meant to be domestic animals.

Those who stood the acid-test of that novel managed to escape to Earth and join the Dingoos. Those who didn't (and sadly, these were by far the majority) stayed with the Masters and incorporated the monstrous satire of *A Dog's Life* into the fabric of their daily lives. They became dogs.

Ten years after the publication of *A Dog's Life*, Daddy effected his own escape to Earth.

His autobiography makes no mention of the fact that he left his two sons behind when he went over to the Dingoos, and he refuses to talk about it still. I have always suspected that he doubted, if only slightly, whether he was doing the right thing. It was a large enough doubt that he was willing to let us decide for ourselves whether we wished to become Dingoos or remain Leashed.

The Earth was swarming with refugees from the Mastery, and the revolutionary movement — the Revolutionary Inductance Corps, or RIC — was getting on its feet. (Naturally, the Dingoos did not want to call themselves *Dingoos*.) Daddy's next task was more difficult, for he had to forge an army from the unorganized mass of apathetic Dingoos who had never left Earth. *The Life of Man* accomplished part of this purpose, for it showed the Din-

goes what they were: an amorphous mass of discontent, without program or purpose; a race that had taken the first step towards its own extinction.

But the Dingoes were not such novel-readers as the pets. Only the more thoughtful read his second novel, and they didn't need to. Daddy gradually realized that no amount of literature would spark the tinder of the Dingoes into a revolutionary firebrand.

And so it was (and now we leave Daddy's autobiography and enter the sphere of raw history) that my father invented a mythology.

The Dingoes were ripe for one. Ever since the appearance of the Masters (who bore an unfortunate resemblance to mankind's favorite gods), organized religion had gotten

quite disorganized. Men of religious or mystical sensibilities were among the first to volunteer for the kennels, where they could contemplate the nearly divine nature of the Masters without any of the discomforts of the ascetic life.

The Dingoes, on the other hand, found it difficult to venerate gods who so much resembled their sworn enemies.

Daddy realized that under these conditions, the Dingoes might accept a "religion" of demonology and sympathetic magic. When the gods are malign, men turn to jujus and totems.

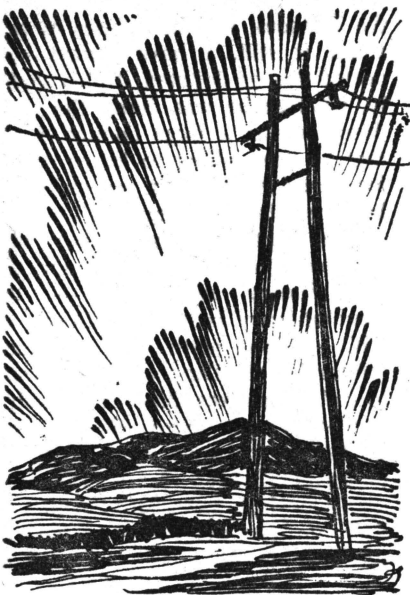
But wax dolls and devil masks would no longer do, for the first law of sympathetic magic is that "Like produces like."

The Masters were electromagnetic phenomena; then what better talisman than a dry cell?

In any elementary physics text, there was a wealth of arcane lore, hieratic symbols, and even battle cries. Children were taught Kirchhoff's Laws in their cradles, and men (and women) wore cork helmets to ward off the Masters, since cork was a good insulator. It was nonsense, but it was effective nonsense. The Revolutionary Inductance Corps won an overwhelming majority in the councils of the Dingoes on the slogan: ELECT RIC.

Daddy became Triode in the revolutionary government, next in authority to the High Cathode himself. Everyone was ready to begin the revolution, and no one had the least idea how to go about it.

Which goes to show that it's good



to be prepared, because that was when a providential sunspot short-circuited the Masters.

The leaders of the Dingoes had managed to take the credit for their own good luck, but now a month had passed since the sunspot, and already the Masters had manifested themselves here and there as localized patches of luminescence in the atmosphere, hovering over their pets and repossessing them. In a very short time the Mastery would be established stronger than ever, unless the Dingoes found some way to stop them.

Cork helmets may be good for morale, but in a real contest I'd as soon defend myself with a popgun. If the Dingoes had made any serious plans, Daddy wasn't telling me about them.

## VIII

Daddy, Julie, and I had been waiting in the lobby of the St. Paul Hotel for fifteen minutes, and in all that time we hadn't seen one room clerk or bellboy.

There weren't even many guests, for Earth had become so depopulated during the Mastery that a roof and a bed were always easy to come by. What you couldn't find anywhere was labor. Even the best hotels and restaurants were self-service.

Finally Bruno and Rocky (for that had come to seem a better name for her than Roxanna) finished dressing and came down to the lobby. Bruno was wearing an unpressed cotton suit and a sport shirt open at the neck, so that a little bit of the bandage

about his chest peeped out. Rocky was dressed to kill; Julie looked as staid as a nun in comparison. But when you're only twenty years old, you don't have to try so hard as you do when you're thirty-two.

We exchanged pleasantries, decided on a restaurant, and went out to Daddy's car — and thus began the ghastliest night of my life.

Bruno was returning to his post in Duluth the next day, and we'd been unable to put him off any longer. For days he had been insisting that the five of us — the two Schwartzes and the three Whites — “make a night of it.” I felt guilty toward Bruno, and at that time I hadn't yet learned to live with a guilty conscience. I gave in.

I would have been suspicious of overtures of friendship from a man I'd sent to the hospital and I might have simply supposed that, like most Dingoes, Bruno was chiefly interested in making my father's acquaintance. However, his first overture had come before he knew my father was Tennyson White, and so it was hard to doubt his sincerity. I decided that he was only mad.

If I felt guilty and awkward towards Bruno, I can't imagine how Rocky felt towards me. When she had revealed my identity to the Dingoes she couldn't have known that my father was the second-in-command of the Dingoes — not, as she had supposed, their arch-enemy. Only initiated members of the RIC knew who their leaders were. She had intended to see me executed, and instead she had saved my life. Now we were sitting next to each

other in the back seat of Daddy's limousine, talking about old times. When we got out, she managed to bring her spiked heel down on my instep with lethal accuracy, and once, in the middle of the dinner, smiling brightly and chattering all the while, she kicked me square in the shin underneath the tablecloth.

The meal wouldn't have gone beyond the main course if it hadn't been that almost all of Rocky's remarks went over Bruno's head. He was dauntlessly ebullient, and when he started to talk, he could go on indefinitely. To shut off Rocky (who couldn't hear enough about our wedding), I questioned Bruno about his childhood, which had been (it seemed to me) spectacularly awful. For the majority of Dingoes, life is one long battle: against the world, against their families, against their teachers, and against the decay of their own minds and bodies. No wonder Bruno was the aggressive lout that he was! But it didn't make me like him any better.

When the dinner was done and I thought we might make our escape, Bruno brought out an envelope from the pocket of his coat and announced, as though he really expected us to be happy, that he had five tickets for the fight.

"What fight?" I asked.

"The boxing match at the Armory. Kelly Broughan's there tonight, so it should be worth seeing. I bet you don't see many good fights out in the asteroids, do you?"

"No," I said in defeated tones. "None at all."

"There are some beautiful gymnas-

tic competitions, though," Julie put in.

Bruno's laugh was the bellow of a wounded bull. *Gymnastics* was a good joke; *beautiful* was even better. "You're a card, Julie. Dennis, that girl's a card," he got out between bellows.

Rocky's eyes gleamed wickedly. "Dennis, you really must come, seeing that you're such a scrapper yourself. And you must come too, Mr. White. You look worn out."

"What the hell," Daddy said, "let's all go. And afterwards we'll watch the fireworks."

"I love fireworks," Julie said, with forced cheer.

We got up from the table with one accord. Bruno and Rocky were as happy as two children. Julie and I were glum. But Daddy . . .

Daddy was in so profound an abyss of depression and defeat that he was quite literally unaware of most of what was going on around him. He knew, as we did not, that the Dingoes were about to shoot their wad that evening, and he knew, as the rest of the Dingoes did not, that their wad wasn't worth a plugged nickel.

All they had was atomic bombs.

Whether it was because Bruno knew the gate attendant or because Daddy was with us, I don't know, but our General Admission tickets got us seats at ringside. Our eyes had scarcely adjusted to the smokey light of the auditorium, when a bell rang and two men, modestly nude except for colored briefs, approached each other, moving their

arms in nervous rhythms, circling about warily. One (in red trunks) lashed out at the other with his left hand, a feint to the stomach. With his right hand he swung at the other man's face. There was a cracking sound as his naked fist connected with his opponent's cheekbone. The crowd began to scream.

Blood spurted from the man's nose. I averted my eyes. Bruno, in his element, added his distinctive bellow to the uproar. Rocky watched me closely, treasuring my every blench and wince. Daddy looked bored, and Julie kept her eyes closed through the whole thing.

I should have done the same, but when I heard another *thunk* and a loud crash, curiosity overcame my finer feelings and I looked back into the ring. The man in red trunks was lying on his back, his expressionless face a scant few inches from my own. There was blood on it. Rocky was shrieking with pleasure, but Bruno, who felt an allegiance for the fighter in red trunks, shouted, "Get up, you bum!"

I was about to be nauseous. I rose from my seat, mumbling apologies, and found my way outside, where I was discreetly sick in a hedge across the street from the Armory. It was actually a very interesting experience, for it was the second time in my whole life I had thrown up. I was reminded of the apple I had eaten in the Nelson orchard.

The hedge bordered on a park which had been allowed to go to seed. Through the thick summer foliage I could see the glint of moon-

lit water. I strolled down the hillside to the pond's edge.

Down there, the din of the stadium melted into the other night sounds: the croaking of the frogs, the rustle of poplar leaves, the rippling water. It was quiet and earthlike.

A full moon shone overhead, like the echo of a thousand poems. All the earthbound poets who had stolen the fire of their lyrics from that moon, age after age! It had passed them by, oblivious of histories, and it would pass me by in time. That's the way that things should be.

I knew then that I belonged to the Earth, and my spirit dilated with happiness. It wasn't quite the right time to be happy — but there it was. Julie and the moon were part of it, but it was also the frogs croak-



ings, the poplars, the stadium; Daddy, cynical, aspiring, even defeated; partly too it was Bruno and Roxanna, if only because they were so vital. These things melted into my memory of the Nelson farm, and it seemed that I could smell the winy smell of apples rotting in the grass.

The sky was growing brighter and brighter. The moon . . .

But was it the moon? A cloud of mist had gathered above the pond and it glowed until the full moon was almost blotted out behind it.

The meshes of the Leash closed over my mind, and a voice inside my head purred kindly: *White Fang, good boy! It's all right now. We heard your call. (But I hadn't called! It was just that I had been so happy!) And now I've come. Your Master has come back at last for you.*

I cried out then, a simply cry of pain. To be taken away now! Only a few days before I had cried for the lack of this voice — and now . . .

*There, it soothed, there, there, there. Has it been bad? Has it been that very bad? Those terrible Dingoes have captured you, but it won't happen again. There, there.*

The Leash began gently to stroke the sensory area of the cortex: soft fur wrapped me, scented with musk. Faint ripples of harp-music (or was that only the water of the pond?) sounded behind my Master's voice, which poured forth comforting words, like salve spread over a wound.

Then, with a sudden pang, I remembered Daddy. (*Don't think of*

*your poor father, the Leash bade.*)

He was waiting for me. Julie was waiting for me. (*We'll get Julie back, too. Now, don't you worry yourself any more.*)

Desperately I tried not to think, or at least to keep my thoughts so scrambled that I would not betray the things I knew. But it was exactly that effort that focused my thoughts on the forbidden subjects.

I tried to think of nonsense, of poetry, of the moon, dim behind the glowing air. But the Leash, sensing my resistance, closed tighter around my mind, and cut through my thin web of camouflage. It shuffled through my memory as though it were a deck of cards, and it stopped (there was just time enough for me to catch the images then) to examine images of my father with particular attention.

There was, on the very edge of my perceptions, a sound: *Ourrp*. Which was repeated: *Ourrp*. It was not a sound my Leash would make. The harp-music quavered for a moment, becoming a prosaic ripple of water. I concentrated on that single sound, straining against the Leash.

"What is that sound?" I asked my Master. To answer me he had to stop sorting through my memories. *Nothing. It's nothing. Don't think about it. Listen to the beautiful music, why don't you? Think of your father.*

Whatever was making the sound seemed to be down in the grass. I could see clearly in the wash of light from the cloud above me. I parted the grass at my feet, and I saw the beastly thing. *Don't think about it!*



The front half of a frog projected from the distended jaws of a water snake. The snake, seeing me, writhed, pulling his victim into the denser grass.

Again the Leash bade me not to look at this thing, and, truly, I did not want to. It was so horrible, but I could not help myself.

The frog had stretched his front legs to the side to prevent the last swallow that would end him. Meanwhile, the back half of him was being digested. He emitted another melancholy *Ourrp*.

*Horrible, I thought. Oh, horrible, horrible, horrible!*

*Stop this. You . . . must . . . stop . . .*

The snake lashed his body, wriggling slowly backwards. The frog's front feet grasped at sprigs of grass. His *Ourrp* had grown quite weak. In the failing light, I almost lost sight of the struggle in the shadow of the tall grass. I bent closer.

In the moon's light I could see a thin line of white froth about the snake's gaping jaws.

The cloud of light had disappeared. My Master had left, and I could hear Daddy calling my name. I ran back up to the street. He was there with Julie.

"Mastery!" Julie said. "You shouldn't have run off like that. We came out and saw a light over the lake, and I was sure they'd carried you off."

"They almost did. My Master was there, and I was Leashed. But then I slipped out of it somehow. And he went away. He just disappeared. Are you all right, Daddy?"

For he was visibly shaking with excitement. "Oh, quite, quite," he said, paying scant attention. "I'm thinking."

"He had an idea," Julie explained, "right after you ran out of the fight. I guess this is what happens when he has ideas."

Bruno pulled up beside us in the limousine and honked, not because we hadn't seen him, but just because he liked to honk. We got into the back seat and the car tore off down the street at a speed that it must not have hit for the last half a century.

"Rocky's making the calls you told her to, sir," Bruno announced.

"Fine. Now, Dennis, what was this about your Master?"

I explained what had happened,



concluding with an account of the frog and the snake.

"And while you were watching that, your Master just faded away?"

"Yes. If he'd kept at me much longer, he'd have learned everything he was looking for. I couldn't have stood out against him. So why did he go?"

"One more question, first. What did you feel about that frog? Precisely."

"It was ugly. I felt . . . disgusted."

"Was it anything like the way you felt at the fight tonight?"

"Worse."

"But the same sort of thing? Ugliness, then disgust and nausea?"

"Yes."

"Then those are the weapons we'll fight them with! Dennis, my son! Before this night is over, you will be a great hero of the revolution!"

"Don't I deserve an explanation, or does the revolution need ignorant heroes?"

"When you left the fight you looked so distressed that I was a bit amused. Dennis is such an esthete still, I thought. And then I remembered the old saw: *Like Master, like man*. Turn it around, and it's the formula for our weapon: *Like man, like Master*. The Masters are just their own pets writ large. They're esthetes, every last one of them. And we're their favorite art-form. A human brain is the clay they work in. They order our minds just the way they order the Northern Lights. That's why they prefer an intelligent, educated pet to an undeveloped Dingo. The Dingoes are lumpy clay, warped canvas, faulty marble."

"They must feel about a Dingo the way I do about Salvador Dali," Julie said.

She always wanted to argue about Salvador Dali with me, because she knows I like him.

"Or the way I feel about prize fights," I suggested.

"Or any experience," Daddy concluded, "that offends a person's esthetic sensibilities. They just can't stand ugliness."

We were silent for a while, considering this. Except Bruno. "Give yourself time, Dennis. You'll get so you like a fight. Kelly just wasn't in form tonight, that's all."

Before I could answer, the limousine was sailing down a concrete ramp into a brightly lit garage. "The hospital," Bruno announced.

A man in a white robe approached us. "Everything is ready, Mr. White. As soon as we received your call, we set to work."

"The radiomen are here, too?"

"They're working with our technicians already. And Mrs. Schwartz said she'd join her husband directly."

A terrible light suddenly kindled the night sky outside the garage.

"The Masters!" I cried.

"Damnation, the bombs!" Daddy exclaimed. "I forgot about them. Dennis, go with the doctor and do what he says. I have to call up RIC headquarters and tell them to stop the bombings."

"What are they bombing?"

"They're trying to land one in the Van Allen Belt. I tried to tell them it wouldn't do any good. They tried it in 1972, and it didn't accomplish a thing. But they were getting des-

perate, and I couldn't suggest any better plan. But now it would be disastrous if they detonated a bomb in the Van Allen Belt, because it will knock out radio communications; and we're going to be needing them. Bruno, Julie, wait in the car for me."

A team of doctors led me down the long enamel-white corridors to a room filled with a complicated array of electrical and surgical equipment. The doctor-in-chief indicated that I was to lie down on an uncomfortable metal pallet. When I had done so, two steel bars were clamped on either side of my head. The doctor held a rubber mask over my mouth and nose.

"Breathe deeply," he said.

The anesthetic worked quickly.

## IX

Daddy was yelling at the doctor when I woke up. "Did you have to use an anesthetic? We don't have time to waste on daintiness."

"The placement of the electrodes is a very delicate operation. He should be awake in any moment."

"I'm awake," I said.

The doctor rushed over to my pallet. "Don't move your head," he warned. Rather unnecessarily, it seemed, for my head was still clamped in the steel vice, although I was now propped up into a sitting position.

"How are you feeling?" Daddy asked.

"Miserable."

"That's *fine*. Now, listen: the machine behind you ("Don't look," the

doctor interrupted.) is an electroencephalograph. It records brain waves."

The doctor broke in again: "There are electrodes in six different areas. I've tried to explain to your father that we're uncertain where perceptions of an esthetic nature are centered. Little work has been done since —"

"Later, doctor, later. Now what I want Dennis to do is suffer. Actually, it's White Fang who will suffer. White Fang must drown in misery. I've already arranged some suitable entertainments, but you should tell me right now if there's anything especially distasteful to you that we might get. Some little phobia all your own."

"Please — explain what this is about?"

"Your electroencephalograms are being taken to every radio station in the city. The wave patterns will be amplified and broadcast over AM and FM. Every station in the country, in the world, is standing by to pick them up. Tomorrow night we'll give the Masters a concert like they've never heard before."

A man in workclothes brought in a blackboard and gave it to Daddy.

"Doctor, you have better fingernails than I do. Rub them over this slate." It made an intolerable noise, which the doctor kept up for a solid minute.

"How does the graph look?" Daddy asked.

"Largest responses are in the sensory area. But fairly generalized elsewhere, especially during the first twenty seconds."

"Well, there's lots more coming. Look at these pictures, Dennis." He showed me illustrations from a medical encyclopedia that I will refrain from describing here. The people in the pictures were beyond the reach of medicine. Beyond the reach, even, of sympathy.

"The response is stronger and more general now. Quite well defined."

Daddy passed a vial of formaldehyde beneath my nose. It was actually more a bottle than a vial, and in it —

I screamed.

"Excellent," the doctor said.

"Bring in the band," said Daddy.

A crew of four men with musical instruments I was unfamiliar with (they were, I've since learned, electric guitar, musical saw, accordion, and tuba) entered the room. They were dressed in outlandish costumes: glorified work clothes in garish colors garnished with all sorts of leather and metal accessories. On their heads were ridiculous, flaring bonnets.

"Extraordinary," the doctor said, "he's already responding."

"Go to it, boys," Daddy said.

They began — well, they began to *sing*.

It was like singing. Their untuned instruments blasted out a stupid *One-two-three, One-two-three* repetitive melody, which they accompanied with strident screams of "Roll out the bare ul." When I thought that this new attack on my sensibilities had reached the threshold of tolerance, Daddy, who had

been watching me intently, leaped up and began to slam his feet on the floor and join them in that awful song.

Daddy has a terrible voice for singing. It rasps.

But his voice was the least of it; it was his behavior that was so mortifying. I wanted to turn my head away, but the vice held it fast. For a man of such natural dignity to so debase himself, and that man my own father!

This was, of course, just the response Daddy was looking for.

When they had finished their gross display, I begged for a moment's reprieve. Daddy dismissed the band and returned the accordion player his cowboy hat.

"Don't work him too hard, until we have some idea of his breaking point," the doctor advised. "Besides, I'd like to see the intern just a minute, if you'll excuse me. The photographs gave me an idea: there are some patients in the hospital . . ."

"Have you thought of anything, Dennis?"

"In a way, yes. Is Bruno still around?"

"He should be downstairs."

"If he were to tell me about the things he enjoys — the very worst things — in the long run he might think of more horrors than you. They seem to come naturally to him."

"Good idea. I'll send for him."

"Roxanna, too, if she's down there. I remember how she watched me at the boxing match. She'd be able to help you quite a lot."

As Daddy left the room, the doc-

tor returned, escorting a caravan of litters. Photographs are no equivalent for the real thing.

It went on that way for four hours, and every minute seemed worse than the one before. Bruno had a limitless imagination, especially when it was abetted by alcohol and his wife.

He told me about his favorite fight to begin with. He told me what he would like to do with pets, and what he *would* like to do, if he had more time. Then he discoursed on the mysteries of love, a subject on which Rocky, too, was eloquent.

After two hours of these and other pleasures, I asked to have some coffee. Rocky left for it and returned with a steaming mug from which I took one greedy swallow before I realized it was not coffee. Rocky had remembered how I felt about blood.

When I had been revived with smelling salts, Daddy brought in more entertainers. They had come to the hospital directly after their last fight at the Armory. For some reason, most of what happened after that point I can no longer remember.

## X

We were out on the tile terrace of the hospital, Daddy, Julie, and I. Below us the Mississippi was a pool of utter blackness and unknown extent. It was an hour after sunset, and the moon had not yet risen. The only light came from the North, where the great auroral floodlight swept out from the horizon



across the constellations.

"Five minutes," Daddy announced nervously.

In five minutes radio stations all over the world would begin to broadcast my performance of the night before. I had heard an aural equivalent of my electroencephalograms, and I wasn't worried. In a war based on esthetics, that recording was a doomsday machine.

"Does your head still hurt?" Julie asked, brushing a feather-light hand over my bandages.

"Only when I try to remember last night."

"Let me kiss the hurt away."

"Three minutes," Daddy announced, "and stop that. You're making me nervous."

Julie straightened her blouse, which was made of some wonderful,

sheer, crinkly nylon. I had really begun to admire some of the uses of clothing.

We watched the aurora. All over the city, lights had been turned off. Everyone, the whole world, was watching the aurora.

"What will you do now that you're High Cathode?" Julie asked, to make conversation.

"In a few minutes the revolution should be over. I don't think I'd like administrative work. Not after this," Daddy said.

"You're going to resign?"

"As soon as they let me. I've got the itch to paint some more. Did you know I paint? I did a self-portrait once that's over my desk. I think it's pretty good. In any case, it's traditional for retired generals to paint. And then I might write my memoirs. I've picked a title for them: *The Esthetic Revolution.*"

"Ten seconds," I said.

We watched the northern skyline. The aurora was a curtain of bluish light across which bands and streamers of intense whiteness danced and played.

At first you couldn't notice any difference. The spectacle glimmered with the same rare beauty that has belonged to it from time immemorial, but tonight its beauty was that of a somber *Dies Irae*, played just for us.

Then one of the white bands that was shooting up from the horizon disappeared, like an electric light being switched off. It seemed unnaturally abrupt, but I couldn't be sure.

For a long while nothing more happened. But when five of the arcing lights snapped out of the sky at the same moment, I knew that the Masters were beginning their exodus.

"Elephantiasis, I'll bet."

"What's that, Dennis?"

"The picture you showed me. I can remember it very clearly."

The auroral display was less bright by half when they came to the hillbilly band. I turned on the radio just to be sure. Through all the blasts and shrieks and whistles of my neural patterns, there was an unmistakable rhythm of *Oom-pah-pah, Oom-pah-pah.*

When the broadcast came to Rocky's unspeakable potion, there was a tremendous blast across the heavens. For an instant the entire sky was stained white. The white faded. The aurora was only a dim blue-white shadow in the north. There was hardly a trace of beauty in it. It flickered meaninglessly in random patterns.

The Masters had left Earth. They couldn't stand the barking. END

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## The Place Where Readers And Editor Meet...

Dear Editor:

I quit buying *If* a couple of years ago because most of the stuff printed in it was second best. Now it's the best science-fiction magazine on the market. What happened?

I just read the first installment of *Starchild* and, knowing me, I will probably miss the other two installments. But I'll try not to. It's starting out to read like many of the old-time novels. That's what makes it so interesting. A lot of science fiction is becoming dull and boring. It seems most of the writers are of the mind that whatever they write should be reasonably able to come true. Which is fine if you want to be a forecaster. Me, I like my science fiction unbelievable and with all kinds of impossibilities like spacelings and pyropods.

I'm in complete accord with Mr. John Cochran and his wishes to have good science fiction brought to television. I'm sick of having to defend science fiction novels to all my friends who don't read it, after they've seen some monster movie. But how do we go about it? Mr. Cochran suggests writing

the networks. I don't think that would work simply because all of us good-intentioned people won't write. We'll all sit back and think the other one is doing it . . . or we'll think no one is doing it and we won't want to be the only one. There must be someone out there in readerland who has the perfect solution in his mind . . . so please write to *If* and let's see what can be done to further good sf on TV.

When are you going to have more Cordwainer Smith and his wonderful underpeople stories? Will they ever be put in a novel? I can't seem to get enough of them.

Now, if you have the time could you answer a few questions for me?

If a would-be writer sent you a story with a good plot, etc., but it was not well written, what would you do? There must be all kinds of people like myself!) who have over developed imaginations, but lack the special talent it takes to put it down on paper.

Don't suggest a writing school. Not only do I not have the time but my work keeps me moving from month to month and I never know

where I might be tomorrow. Besides, sometimes I'm convinced I'm too stupid to learn anything any more—things like spelling, sentence structure and all the things it takes to be a *good* writer. Or more likely the truth is I'm just too lazy. —Ramona Alderson, Box 102, Kneeland, California.

• What happened? Well, for one thing—a lot of hard work happened!

Cordwainer Smith has gone from underpeople to Down Under people for a while—he's on a research sabbatical among the aborigines in New Zealand. But he'll be back in production before long, and when he is we'll try to get him back in *If*.

What to do with a story that has a good idea but no literary skill? You've put your finger on the hardest problem of them all. (Fortunately for an editor's peace of mind, it doesn't happen often—most people, by the time they have anything to say in the first place, can usually manage to say it in a presentable way.) All we really can do when it does happen, though, is say: *Don't be "too lazy". Do learn your skills. Do work at writing . . .* Sometimes it works. At least three of today's best sf writers started out terrible and gradually, painfully, learned their craft.—*The Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I agree whole-heartedly that you should enlarge the most exciting part of *If*, namely *Hue & Cry*. Why don't you use microscopic print, such as they did in the days of *Startling* and *Thrilling Wonder*? This would probably appease those who enjoy the fiction more than the lettercol. You'd get more in the same amount of space. You *did* use small-print letters before *Farnham's Free-*

*hold* pushed *Hue & Cry* out for three issues. Why not go back?

Being a relative newcomer to the world of sf magazines (they're awfully hard to find out here), I looked forward with mixed emotions to my first Retief story. Then when I read it, I couldn't make heads nor tails of what was up. From then on I skipped the Retief tales, wondering why you were so proud of having all of his adventures in *If*, exclusively. But the other day I bought a collection of Retief stories and after reading the first one, I understood what Retief was all about. Then I went back and eagerly devoured all the other Retief stories I had accumulated, and now I easily see why you are so proud of yourselves. (It was your recent Laumer serial that gave me the idea that the Retief series might be worth reading.)

Your covers: The December '64 cover was even better (believe it or not) than the October '64 cover was bad. These were your extremes, covering an unbelievable range, for 1964. Or any other times, for that matter. I've never seen a better cover than the one on the December issue.

Well, I guess I've been a pain in the neck long enough. You may find it hard to believe after all this, but I like your mags better than the others. Well, at least most of the time. — Danny Hughes, 3534 Nolen Drive, Indianapolis, Indiana 46234.

• Small print? Good idea!—*The Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

On the editorial page of your December, 1964 issue you say, "In every issue of IF we run a 'first' story by someone who has never



before appeared in a professional magazine. This month's is L. D. Ogle's *The Heat Racers*, a fresh and pleasing tale." WELL, I looked through that magazine page by page and I didn't find any story by L. D. Ogle called *The Heat Racers*. Any explanations?

Answering John D. Cochran in the same issue: It's my firm belief that so-called science fiction in TV and movies is not science fiction. They are really just plain old horror movies, although I do agree with you that *Outer Limits* comes close. It is also my opinion that the reason these are horror shows is the basic evil of man showing. As you can see, they always show the alien as an enemy. Every monster is out to kill people and to destroy our cities.

I think this is the basic emotion of man coming through. How do you think the great civilizations of the past became so? By slavery and murder — by the same basic survival pattern of an animal, that the strong shall survive by feeding upon the weak. I can just see what would happen now if we met beings from another planet. At first fear and an attempt to destroy them. Then, if we find we are stronger, we will move in and push them around — just as the American Indian was treated.

What I am waiting for is that day when we meet a civilization that is really peaceful, but after we make a try at showing our superiority they slap us down as we do a small child. They tell us to get back into our playpen until we are mature enough to come out. — Henry K. Allen, 809 Farmers Avenue, Tempe, Arizona 85281.

• Well, actually those ancient civilizations didn't really get power-

ful because they held slaves. It was just that slavery was the best way available of organizing energy then, of keeping the populace alive and creating a surplus of available effort for state purposes. We do things better now . . . or anyway, differently. . . .

Explanation of what happened to the Ogle story? Well, actually, we got lost in our time machine. We were thinking of the next issue. December's first-time-in-print author was Larry Niven, with *The Coldest Place*. (And this month's is John McCallum, a Canadian fireman, with *Our Martian Neighbors*.) — *The Editor*.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Ever since I subscribed to *If* in June, I've liked most of the stories, the features and the magazine itself. I hope *If* never goes large-size. I hope also that *If* avoids the advertisements that clutters others. *If* should be a special, distinctive magazine — the only monthly to come out bi-monthly (in September), the publisher of *Retief*, the only magazine I know that has a new author presented every month.

The recent stories I've liked best have been *The Slaves of Gree*, *The Prince and the Pirate*, *The Castle of Light*, *Rescue Mission*, *The Hounds of Hell*, *The Perfect People*, *When Time Was New*, *At the Top of the World* and *Pig in a Pokey* — but they're all good. (Incidentally, *The Coldest Place* has been disproved. The back of Mercury has just been discovered to be 62 degrees Fahrenheit.) More Cordwainer Smith stories would be good. I like *Hue & Cry* and the editorials. *If's* a good magazine! — Charles Obler, Box 269 Valleybrook Road, Venetia, Pennsylvania 15367.

Dear Editor:

I'm writing this letter in the hope that your fans can halt ABC in their plan to cancel *The Outer Limits*. This is the only true series on TV directed totally to sf, without the typical no-plot monster stories. The episodes have mostly very weak plots and very few times do they come from actual stories written by sf authors.

If all science-fiction fans sent in a letter to ABC asking to keep *Cuter Limits* on the air, then they would have to turn our way. — Tom Stratmoen, 304 North Salem, Arlington Heights, Illinois.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

I wonder whether someone could help me with the name of a novel I read some time ago. The plot centered around an extremely powerful, jet black man-shaped being which was virtually invulnerable and functioned as a nemesis of evil. It left frosted footprints and was apparently a sort of energy sump. — J. O. Alyea, 1869 Drury Lane, Cape Girardeau, Missouri 63701.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

For some time the main way to communicate with other fans was only by letter but now, in the past decade or so, a more personal method of correspondence became available and small groups began to quietly employ it to exchange their ideas.

This was the tape recorder, of course — the nearest thing and best thing to a telephone conversation.

My recorder holds any size reel up to seven inches, dual or full track monophonic, with speeds of 3.75 and 7.5 i.p.s. Please let me know you're there, so we can get

something going! — Roger Alan Cox, 2717 Oakland Avenue, Augusta, Georgia 30904.

\* \* \*

Dear Editor:

Does anyone Out There know if Andre Norton has had any mag stories other than *Mousetrap* in 1954, and if so what their titles, magazines and dates were?

By the way, how about getting Miss Norton to serialize her excellent stories in *If*, and maybe a few from Hal Clement? — Jack Baldwin, 405 North Alison Street, Santa Barbara, California 93103.

• Andre Norton? We'd like that. Hal Clement? Well, how about next month? — *The Editor*.

\* \* \*

That's about all we can get in this time. Back next month with more letters, if we can find the room . . . and with some stories that are going to squeeze that room pretty tight, come to think of it. First there's the conclusion of John Brunner's *The Altar at Asconel* . . . then there's a l-o-n-g novelette by Hal Clement called *Raindrop* (you'll like Raindrop! It's a great, orbiting globe of water out in space) . . . and what else we'll have room for, only time and the printers will tell.

Then comes June, beginning *Skylark Duquesne* (yes, it was worth waiting for!) Then July has more of the Skylark, plus another l-o-n-g novelette by a new collaboration team that we think will make their mark in science fiction. The name of the story: *Research Alpha*. The names of the writers: James H. Schmitz and A. E. Van Vogt. Also, there are assorted Fritz Leibers and Keith Laumers to go in somewhere, and — well, wait and see! — *The Editor*.

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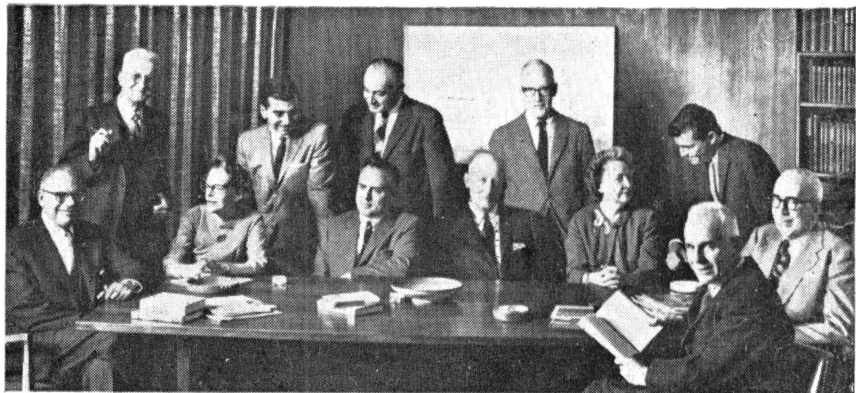
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By Gordon Carroll

Director, Famous Writers School; Former editor, *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, *Inc.*, *Coronet*

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