

THE MAN IN THE MAZE by ROBERT SILVERBERG



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by A. Bertram Chandler

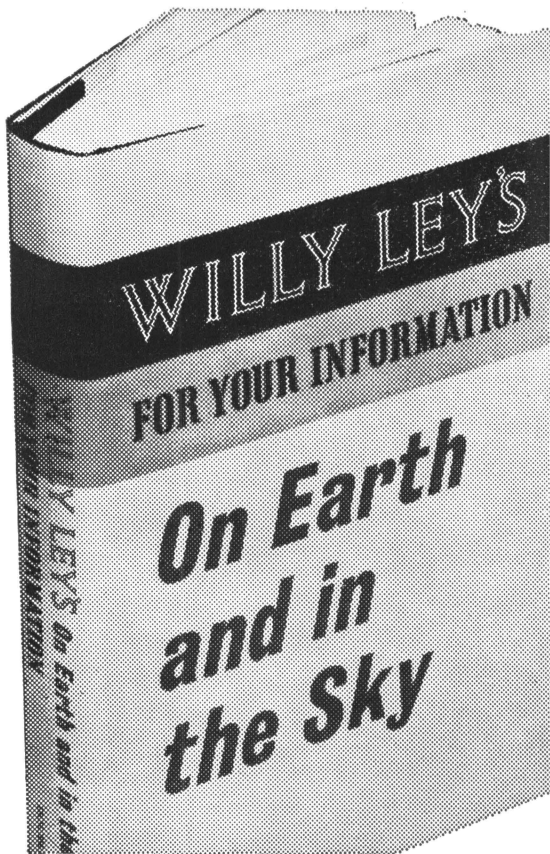
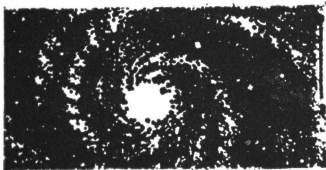
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by John Brunner

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Cover by **BODÉ** from **THE PRODUCT OF THE MASSES**

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# For a Festival of Science Fiction

As this issue appears, the city of Paris will be host to a large-scale exposition of science fiction. Held at the Museum of Decorative Arts on rue de Rivoli, created by Harold Szeeman, director of the Berné Kunsthalle, and produced with the prestigious aid of the Louvre, this science-fiction exposition of some three thousand pieces of art, manuscripts, publications and other incunabula covers everything from the Epic of Gilgamesh to the LEM, by way of Buck Rogers, *The Skylark of Space* and Ed Emshwiller (who painted the cover for its handsome program brochure).

Sounds like fun? We think so; and also fun, we thought, was the annual *Festival Internazionale del Film di Fantascienza*, held every July in the Italian city of Trieste; certainly a science-fiction film festival is a good idea, and the Triestinos do a splendid job of organizing one . . . .

But that's Europe. Question on our minds at this moment is, Why can't we have this sort of thing in the United States?

Generally speaking, this sort of thing is organized with the sponsorship of some large institution — the tourist bureau of a city; a university; a museum; an academy of arts or sciences.

It seems to us that the United States is well endowed with all these things. It also seems to us that, since American science fiction is without much question the world

leader by any standards you care to invoke — the best writers, the most publications, the best organized conventions and conferences, whatever — we owe the whole world of science fiction, and incidentally ourselves, at least some serious consideration of having our own festival.

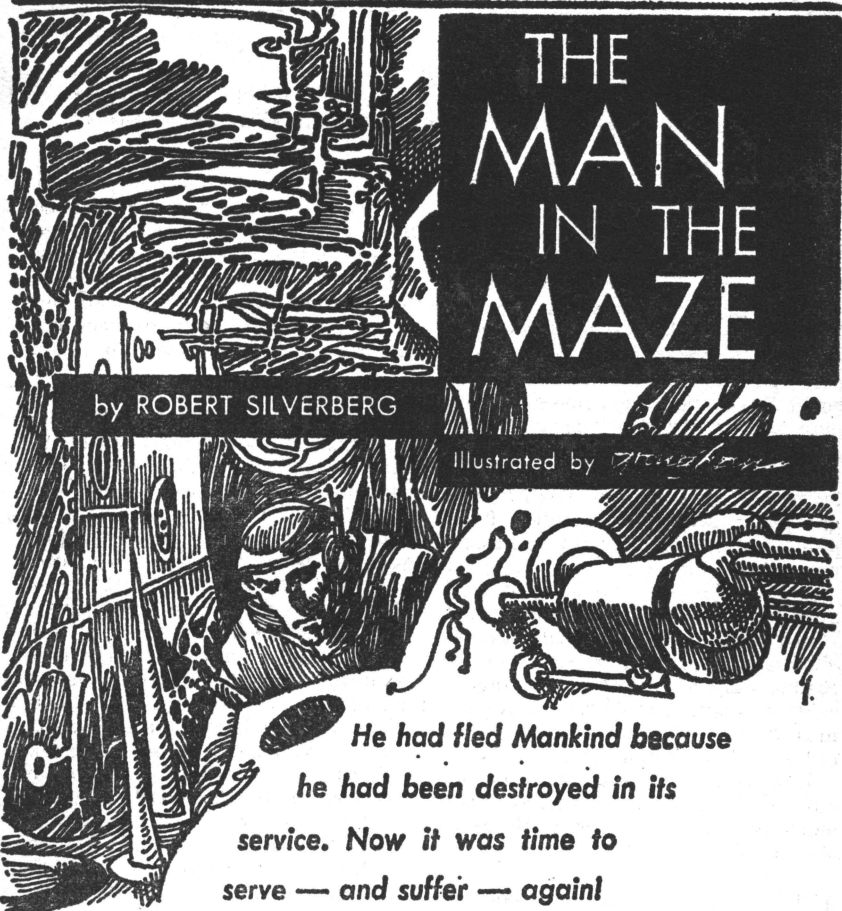
What it needs to get such a project off the ground is, say, the participation of a good-sized school. We can think of any number that would be appropriate. There's M.I.T., with a highly active science-fiction fan club already on the premises (and anyway, living in a space-age, computerized environment that resembles science fiction to begin with). There's Syracuse University, already proudly maintaining the largest depository of science-fiction manuscripts and papers in the world. There's Louisiana State University, which last year did something like it, with its month-long festival of the Year 2000. There are in fact, at least a score of major schools all over the country which have the facilities and appear to have the interest.

A week of showing of science-fiction films . . . a gallery of science-fiction art . . . panel discussions among science-fiction writers, scientists and other useful and interested parties . . . special features ad lib.

Sound like a good idea? Or would you rather go on having to cross the Atlantic for this sort of thing?

— THE EDITOR





# THE MAN IN THE MAZE

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

Illustrated by *Frank Frazetta*

*He had fled Mankind because  
he had been destroyed in its  
service. Now it was time to  
serve — and suffer — again!*

I

Muller knew the maze quite well by this time. He understood its snares and its delusions, its pitfalls, its deadly traps. He had lived within it for nine years.

He still moved warily. Three or

four times already he had learned that his knowledge of the maze, while adequate and workable, was not wholly complete. At least once he had come right to the edge of destruction, pulling back only by some improbable bit of luck just before the unexpected fountaining of an energy flare

sent a stream of raw power boiling across his path. Muller had charted that flare and fifty others; but as he moved through the city-sized labyrinth he knew there was no guarantee he would not meet an uncharted one.

Overhead the sky was darkening. The deep, rich green of late afternoon was giving way to the black of night. Muller paused a moment in his hunting to look at the pattern of the stars. Even that was becoming familiar now. He had chosen his own constellations on this desolate world, searching the heavens for arrangements of brightness that suited his peculiarly harsh, bitter taste. Now they appeared: the Dagger, the Back, the Shaft, the Ape, the Toad. In the forehead of the Ape flickered the small, grubby star that Muller believed was the sun of Earth. He was not sure, because he had destroyed his chart tank after landing here on Lemnos; somehow, though, he felt that that minor fireball must be Sol. The same dim star formed the left eye of the Toad. There were times when Muller told himself that Sol would not be visible in the sky of this world ninety light-years from Earth, but at other times he was quite convinced. Beyond the Toad lay the constellation that Muller had named Libra, the Scales.

Three small moons glittered here. The air was thin but breathable; Muller had long ago ceased to notice that it had too much nitrogen, not enough oxygen. Gripping the butt of his gun tightly, he walked slowly through the alien city, searching for his dinner.

He had six-months' supply of food stored in a radiation locker half a

kilometer away, but yet each night he went hunting so that he could replace at once whatever he drew from his cache. It was a way of devouring the time. And he needed that cache, undepended, against the day when the maze might cripple or paralyze him. His keen eyes scanned the angled streets ahead. Above him rose the walls, screens, traps and confusions of the maze within which he lived. He looked in all directions. The triple moonlight analyzed and dissected his shadow, splitting it into reduplicated images that danced and sprawled before him.

The mass detector mounted over his left ear emitted a high-pitched sound. That told Muller that it had picked up the thermals of an animal in the 50-100 kilogram range. He had the detector programmed to scan in three horizons, of which this was the middle one, the food-beast range. It would also report to him on the proximity of 10-20 kilogram creatures — the teeth-beast range — and on the emanations of beasts over 500 kilograms — the big-beast range. The small ones had a way of going quickly for the throat, and the great ones were careless trampers; Muller hunted those in between and avoided the others.

Now he crouched, readying his weapon. His only concern in hunting was to strike from a secure, well-surveyed point so that in his concentration on his prey he wouldn't be victim to some more dangerous creature. With the kickstaff mounted on the heel of his left boot he probed the wall behind him, making certain

that it would not open and engulf him. It was solid. Good. Muller edged himself backward until his back touched the cool, polished stone. His left knee rested on the faintly yielding pavement. He sighted along the barrel of his gun. The mass detector continued to whine, indicating that the beast was remaining within a hundred-meter radius; the pitch rose slightly from moment to moment as the thermals grew stronger.

Muller was in no hurry. He was at one side of a vast plaza bordered by glassy curving partitions, and anything that emerged from those gleaming crescents would be an easy shot. Muller was hunting tonight in Zone E of the maze, the fifth sector out from the heart, and one of the most dangerous. He rarely went past the relatively innocuous Zone D, but some daredevil mood had prodded him into E this evening. Since finding his way into the maze, he had never risked G or H again at all and had been as far out as F only twice. He came to E perhaps five times a year.

To his right the converging lines of a shadow appeared jutting from one of the curving walls. The song of the mass detector reached into the upper end of the pitch spectrum for an animal of this size. The smallest moon, Atropos, swinging giddily through the sky, changed the shadow pattern; the lines no longer converged, but now one bar of blackness cut across the other two. The shadow of a snout, Muller knew. An instant later he saw his victim.

The animal was the size of a large dog, gray of muzzle and tawny of body, hump-shouldered, ugly, spec-

tacularly carnivorous. For his first few years here Muller had avoided hunting the carnivores, thinking that their meat would not be tasty. He had gone instead after the local equivalent of cows and sheep — mild-mannered ungulates that drifted blithely through the maze cropping the grasses in the garden places. Only when that bland meat palled did he go after one of the fanged, clawed creatures that harvested the herbivores, and to his surprise their flesh was excellent. He watched the animal emerge into the plaza. Its long snout twitched. Muller could hear the sniffing sounds from where he crouched.

Confidently, swaggeringly, the carnivore strode across the sleek pavement of the plaza, its unretracted claws clicking and scraping. Muller fined his beam down to needle aperture and took thoughtful aim. The gun was proximity-responsive and would score a hit automatically, but Muller always keyed in the manual sighting. He and the gun had different goals. The gun was concerned with killing, Muller with eating; and it was easier to do his own aiming than to try to convince the weapon that a bolt through the tender, juicy hump would deprive him of the tastiest cut. The gun, seeking the simplest target, would lance through that hump to the spine and bring the beast down, but Muller favored more finesse.

He chose a target six inches forward from the hump: the place where the spine entered the skull. One shot did it. The animal toppled heavily. Muller went toward it as rapidly as he dared. Quickly he carved away

the inessentials — limbs, head, belly — and sprayed a seal around the raw slab of flesh he cut from the hump. He sliced a hefty steak from the hindquarters, too, and strapped both parcels to his shoulders. Then he swung around, searching for the zigzagging road that was the only safe entry to the core of the maze. In less than an hour he could be at his lair in the heart of Zone A.

He was halfway across the plaza when he heard an unfamiliar sound.

Pausing, he looked back. Three small loping creatures were heading toward the carcass he had abandoned. But the scrabbling of the scavengers was not what he had heard. It had been the low rumbling sound overlaid by a hoarse throb in the middle frequencies, too prolonged to be the roaring of one of the large animals. It was a sound Muller had not heard before.

No: a sound he had not heard *here* before.. It registered somewhere in his memory banks. That double boom, slowly dopplering into the distance — what was it?

The sound had come from over his right shoulder, so it seemed. Muller looked there and saw only the triple cascade of the maze's secondary wall, rising in tier upon glittering amber tier. Above that wall? He saw the star-brightened sky: the Ape, the Toad, the Scales.

Muller remembered the sound now.

A ship; a starship, cutting out of warp onto ion drive to make a planetary landing. The boom of the expellers, the throb of the deceleration tubes, passing over the city. It was

a sound he had not heard in nine years, since his own self-exile on Lemnos had begun. So he was having visitors. Casual intruders, or had he been traced? What did they want? Anger blazed through him. He had had enough of them and their world; why did they have to trouble him here? He wanted nothing to do with Earth or Earthmen.

They would not reach him, he decided.

They would die in the maze and their bones would join the million-year accumulation that lay strewn in the outer corridors.

And if they succeeded in entering, as he had done —

Well, then they would have to contend with him. Muller smiled grimly, adjusted the meat on his back, and returned his full concentration to the job of penetrating the maze. Soon he was within Zone C, and safe. He reached his lair. He stowed his meat. He prepared his dinner. Pain hammered at his skull. After nine years he was no longer alone on this world. They had soiled his solitude. Once again, Muller felt betrayed. He wanted nothing more from Earth than privacy, now; and even that they would not give him. But they would suffer if they managed to reach him within the maze. If.

## II

The ship had erupted from warp a little late, almost in the outer fringes of Lemnos' atmosphere. Charles Boardman disliked that. He demanded the highest possible stan-



dards of performance from himself, and he expected everyone about him to keep the same standards. Especially pilots.

Boardman thumbed the screen to life, and the cabin wall blossomed with a vivid image of the planet below. Scarcely any clouds swathed its surface; he had a clear view through the atmosphere. In the midst of a broad plain was a series of corrugations that even at a height of a hundred kilometers were sharply outlined. Boardman turned to the young man beside him and said, "There you are, Ned. The labyrinth of Lemnos. And Dick Muller right in the middle of it!"

Ned Rawlins pursed his lips. "So big? It must be hundreds of kilometers across!"

"What you're seeing is the outer embankment. The maze itself is surrounded by a concentric ring of earthen walls five meters high and nearly a thousand kilometers in outer circumference. But —"

"Yes, I know," Rawlins burst in. "That dark spot within the outer walls — is that the city itself?"

Boardman nodded. "That's the inner maze. Twenty, thirty, kilometers in diameter, and God knows how many millions of years old. That's where we'll find Muller."

"If we can get inside."

"When we get inside."

"Yes. Yes. Of course. *When* we get inside," Rawlins corrected, reddening. He flashed a quick, earnest smile. "There's no chance we won't find the entrance, is there?"

"Muller did," said Boardman quietly. "He's in there."

"But he's the first who got inside. Everyone else who tried failed. So why will we —"

"There weren't many who tried," Boardman said. "Those who did weren't equipped for the problem. We'll manage, Ned. We have to."

The ship swung toward the planet — going down much too rapidly, Boardman thought, oppressed by the strains of deceleration. He hated travel, and he hated the moment of landing worst of all. But this was a trip he could not have avoided. He eased back in the webfoam cradle and blanked out the screen. Ned Rawlins was still upright, eyes glowing with excitement. How wonderful to be young, Boardman thought. Certainly the boy was strong and healthy — and cleverer than he sometimes seemed. Boardman could not remember having been that sort of young man himself. He had the feeling of having always been on the brink of middle age — shrewd, calculating, well organized. He was eighty, now, with almost half his lifetime behind him, and yet he could not bring himself to believe that his personality had changed in any essential way since he had turned twenty. He had learned techniques, the craft of managing men; he was wiser now; but he was not qualitatively different. Young Ned Rawlins, though, was going to be another person entirely sixty-odd years from now, and very little of the callow boy in the next cradle would survive. Boardman suspected, not happily, that this very mission would be the crucible in which Ned's innocence was blasted from him.

**B**oardman closed his eyes as the ship entered its final landing maneuvers. He felt gravity clawing at his aging flesh. Down. Down. Down. How many planetfalls had he made, loathing every one? The diplomatic life was a restless one. Christmas on Mars, Easter on one of the Centaurine worlds, the midyear feast celebrated on a stinking planet of Rigel, and now this trip, the most complex of all. Man was not made to flash from star to star like this, Boardman thought. I have lost my sense of a universe. They say this is the richest era of human existence; but I think a man can be richer in knowing every atom of a single golden island in a blue sea than by spending his days striding among all the worlds.

There were heavy fleshy jowls about his throat, and pockets of extra meat here and there about his body, giving him a soft, pampered look. At little effort Boardman could have had himself streamlined to the fashionably sleek appearance of a modern man; this was an era when men a century and a quarter old could look like striplings, if they cared to. Early in his career Boardman had chosen to simulate authentic aging. Call it an investment; what he forfeited in chic he gained in status. His business was selling advice to governments, and governments preferred not to buy counsel from men who looked like boys. Boardmen had looked fifty-five years old for the last forty years, and he expected to retain that look of strong, vigorous early middle age at least another half a century. Later, he would allow time to work on him again when he entered

the final phase of his career. He would take on the whitened hair and shrunken cheek of a man of eighty, and pose as Nestor rather than as Ulysses. At the moment it was professionally useful to look only slightly out of trim, as he did.

He was a short man, though he was so stocky that he easily dominated any group at a conference table. His powerful shoulders, deep chest, and long arms would have been better suited to a giant; when he stood up Boardman revealed himself as of less than middle height, but sitting down he was awesome. He found that feature useful too and had never considered altering it. An extremely tall man is better suited to command than to advise, and Boardman had never had the wish to command; he preferred a more subtle exercise of power. But a short man who looks big at a table can control empires. The business of empires is transacted sitting down.

He had the look of authority. His chin was strong, his nose thick and blunt and forceful, his lips both firm and sensuous, his eyebrows immense and shaggy, black strips of fur sprouting from a massive forehead that might have awed a Neanderthal. He wore his hair long and coarse. Three rings gleamed on his fingers, one a gyroscope of platinum and rubies with dull-hued inlays of U-238. His taste in clothing was severe and conservative, running to heavy fabrics and almost medieval cuts. In another epoch he might have been well cast as a worldly cardinal or as an ambitious prime minister; he would have been important in any court at any time.

He was important now. The price of Boardman's importance, though, was the turmoil of travel. Soon he would land on another strange planet, where the air would smell wrong, the gravity would be a shade too strong and the sun's hue would not be right. Boardman scowled.

He looked at Ned Rawlins. Twenty-two, twenty-three years old, something like that: the picture of naive young manhood, although Boardman knew that Ned was old enough to have learned more than he seemed to show. Tall, conveniently handsome without the aid of cosmetic surgery; fair hair, blue eyes, wide, mobile lips, flawless teeth. He was the son of a communications theorist, now dead, who had been one of Richard Muller's closest friends. Boardman was counting on that connection to carry them a good distance in the delicate transactions ahead.

"The landing seems so slow, doesn't it?" Rawlins asked.

"Another minute now," Boardman said. The boy's face looked scarcely stretched by the forces acting upon them. His left cheek was drawn down slightly, that was all. It was weird to see the semblance of a sneer on that shining visage.

"Here we come now," Boardman muttered and closed his eyes again. The ship closed the last gap between itself and the ground. The expellers cut out; the deceleration tubes snarled their last. There was the final awkward moment of uncertainty, then steadiness, the landing jacks gripping firmly, the roar of landing silenced. We are here, Boardman thought. Now for the maze. Now for Mr. Richard

Muller. Now to see if he's become any less horrible in the past nine years. Maybe he's just like everyone else, by now. If he is, Boardman told himself, God help us all.

### III

Within the maze Muller contemplated his options. In the milky green recesses of the viewing tank he could see the ship and the plastic domes that had sprouted beside it and the tiny figures of men moving about. He wished now that he had been able to find the fine control of the viewing tank; the images he received were badly out of focus. But he considered himself lucky to have the use of the tank at all. Many of the ancient instruments in this city had become useless long ago through the decay of some vital part. A surprising number had endured the eons unharmed, a tribute to the technical skill of their makers; but of these, Muller had been able to discover the function of only a few, and he operated those imperfectly.

He watched the blurred figures of his fellow humans working busily and wondered what new torment they were preparing for him.

He had tried to leave no clues to his whereabouts when he fled from Earth. He had come here in a rented ship, filing a deceptive flight plan by way of Sigma Draconis. During his warp trip, of course, he had had to pass six monitor stations, but he had given each one a misleading simulated great-circle galactic route record. A routine comparison check of all the monitor stations would reveal

that Muller's successive announcements of location added up to nonsense, but he had gambled that he would manage to complete his flight and vanish before they ran one of the regular checks. Evidently he had won that gamble, for no interceptor ships had come after him.

Emerging from warp in the vicinity of Lemnos, he had carried out one final evasive maneuver by leaving his ship in a parking orbit and descending by drop-capsule. A disruptor bomb, pre-programmed, had blasted the ship to molecules and sent the fragments traveling on a billion conflicting orbits through the universe; it would take a fancy computer indeed to calculate a probable nexus of source for those! The bomb was designed to provide fifty false vectors per square meter of explosion surface, a virtual guarantee that no tracer could possibly be effective within a finite span of time. Muller needed only a very short finite span — say, sixty years. Sixty years of solitude and a peaceful, private death, that was all he asked.

Had they really traced him?

Muller decided that they had not. They had no motive for following him. He was no fugitive who had to be brought back to justice. He was simply a man with a loathsome affliction, an abomination in the sight of his fellow mortals, and doubtless Earth felt itself well rid of him. The kindest thing he could do for his own kind was to remove himself from their midst, and he had done that as thoroughly as he could. They would hardly make an effort to come looking for someone so odious to them.

Who were these intruders, then? Archeologists, he suspected. The ruined city of Lemnos still held a magnetic, fatal fascination for them, for everyone. Muller had hoped that the risks of the maze would continue to keep men away. It had been discovered over a century earlier, but before his arrival there had been a period of many years in which Lemnos was shunned. For good reason: Miller had many times seen the corpses of those who had tried and failed to enter the maze.

Snugly established at the core of the maze, he had command of enough sensing devices to follow, however vaguely, the progress of any living creatures outside. Thus he could trace the wanderings from zone to zone of the animals that were his prey and also those of the great beasts who offered danger. To a limited degree he could control the snares of the maze, which were normally nothing more than passive traps, but which could be employed aggressively, under the right conditions against some enemy. He asked himself if he would use those defenses against human beings if they penetrated that far and had no answer. He did not really hate his own species. He just preferred to be left alone, in what passed for peace.

He eyed the screens. He occupied a squat hexagonal cell, apparently one of the housing units in the inner city, equipped with a wall of viewing tanks. It had taken him more than a year to find out which parts of the maze corresponded to the images on the screens; but by patiently



posting markers he had matched the dim images to the glossy reality. The six lowest screens along the wall showed him pictures of areas in Zones A through F; the cameras, or whatever they were, swiveled through 180-degree arcs, enabling the hidden mysterious eyes to patrol the entire region around each of the zone entrances. Since only one entrance provided safe access to the zone within, all others being lethal, the screens effectively allowed Muller to watch the inward progress of any prowler. It did not matter what was taking place at any of the false entrances. Those who persisted there would die.

Screens seven through ten, in the upper bank, relayed images that apparently came from Zones G and H, the outermost, largest, and deadliest zones of the maze. Muller had not wanted to go to the trouble of returning to those zones to check his theory in detail; he was satisfied that the screens were pickups from points in the outer zones, and it was not worth risking those zones again to find out more accurately where the pickups were mounted. As for the eleventh and twelfth screens, they obviously showed views of the plain outside the maze altogether — the plain now occupied by a newly arrived starship from Earth.

Few of the other devices left him by the ancient builders of the maze were as informative. Mounted on a dais in the center of the city's central plaza, shielded by a crystal vault, was a twelve-sided stone the color of ruby, in whose depths a mechanism like an intricate shutter ticked and pulsed.

He suspected some sort of clock, keyed to a nuclear oscillation, sounding out the units of time its maker employed. Periodically the stone underwent temporary changes: its face turned cloudy, deepened in hue to blue or even black, swung on its mounting. Muller's careful record-keeping had not yet told the meaning of changes. He could not even analyze the periodicity. The metamorphoses were not random, but the pattern they followed was beyond his ken.

At the eight corners of the plaza were metallic spikes, smoothly tapering to heights of some twenty feet. Throughout the cycle of the year these spikes revolved, so they were calendars, it seemed, moving on hidden bearings. Muller knew that they made one complete revolution in each thirty-month turning of Lemnos about its somber orange primary, but he suspected some deeper purpose for these gleaming pylons. Searching for it occupied much of his time.

Spaced neatly in the streets of Zone A were cages whose bars were hewn from an alabaster-like rock. Muller saw no way of opening these cages; yet twice during his years here he had awakened to find the bars withdrawn into the stone pavement and the cages gaping wide. The first time they had remained open for three days, and then the bars had returned to their positions while he slept, sliding into place and showing no seam where they could have parted. When the cages opened again, a few years later, Muller watched them constantly to find the secret of their mechanism. But on the fourth night he dozed just long enough to miss closing again.

Equally mysterious was the aqueduct. Around the length of Zone B ran a closed trough, perhaps of onyx, with angular spigots placed at fifty-meter intervals. When any sort of vessel, even a cupped hand, was placed beneath a spigot, it yielded pure water. But when he had attempted to poke a finger into one of the spigots he found no opening. Nor could he see any, even while the water was coming forth; It was as though the fluid issued through a permeable plug of stone, and Muller found it hard to accept that. He welcomed the water, though.

It surprised him that so much of the city should have survived. Archeologists had concluded, from a study of the artifacts and skeletons found on Lemnos outside the maze, that there had been no intelligent life here for upward of a million years. Yet most of the city, supposedly built before the evolution of mankind on Earth, looked untouched by the ages. The dry weather could account in part for that; there were no storms here, and rain had not fallen since Muller's arrival. But wind and wind-blown sand could carve walls and pavements over a million years, and there was no sign of such carving here. Nor had sand accumulated in the open streets of the city. Muller knew why. Hidden pumps collected all debris, keeping everything spotless. He had gathered handfuls of soil from the garden plots, scattering little trails here and there. Within minutes the dribbles of soil had begun to slither across the polished pavement, vanishing into slots that open-

ed briefly and closed again at the intersection of buildings and ground.

Evidently beneath the city lay a network of inconceivable machinery — imperishable caretaker devices that guarded the city against the tooth of time. Muller had not been able to reach that network, though. With improvised tools he had begun to dig in the garden areas, hoping to reach the subcity that way, but though he had driven one pit more than a dozen feet and another even deeper, he had come upon no signs of anything below but more soil. The hidden guardians had to be there, however: the instruments that operated the viewing tanks, swept the streets, repaired the masonry, and controlled the murderous traps that studded the outer zones of the labyrinth.

It was hard to imagine a race that could build a city of this sort — a city designed to last millions of years. It was harder still to imagine how they could have vanished. Assuming that the fossils found in the burial yard outside the walls were those of the builders — not necessarily a safe assumption — this city had been put together by burly humanoids, a meter and a half tall, immensely thick through the chest and shoulders, with long cunning fingers, eight to the hand, and short double-jointed legs. They were gone from the known worlds of the universe, and nothing like them had been found in any other system; perhaps they had withdrawn to some far galaxy yet unvisited by man, or possibly they had been a non-spacegoing race that evolved and perished right here on Lemnos, leaving this city as their monument.

The rest of the planet was without trace of habitation.

Had the builders of the maze been slaughtered in their own sleek streets, and had the mechanical wardens swept the bones away? No way of knowing. They were gone. Muller, entering their city, had found it silent, desolate, as if it had never sheltered life, an automatic city, sterile, flawless. Only beasts occupied it. They had had a million years to find their way through the maze and take possession. Muller had counted some two dozen species of mammals, in all sizes from rat-equivalent to elephant-equivalent; there were grazers who munched on the city's gardens and hunters who fed on the herbivores. The ecological balance seemed perfect.

The city was his now.

There had been others who had come here, and not all of them had been human. Entering the maze, Muller had been treated to the sight of those who had failed to go the route. He had sighted a score of human skeletons in Zones H, G, and F. Three men had made it to E, and one to D. Muller had expected to see men's bones; what took him off guard was the collection of alien bones. In H and G he had seen the remains of great dragon-like creatures, still clad in the shreds of spacesuits. Some day curiosity might triumph over fear and he might go back for a second look. Closer to the core lay an assortment of life-forms, mostly humanoid but veering from the standard structure. How long ago they had come here Muller could not

guess; even in this dry climate, would exposed skeletons last more than a few centuries? The galactic litter was a sobering reminder of something Muller already adequately knew; that despite the experience of man's first two centuries of extrasolar travel, in which no living intelligent alien race was encountered, the universe was full of other forms of life, and sooner or later man would meet them. The boneyard on Lemnos contained relics of at least a dozen different races — maybe more.

The inconsistency of finding the litter of bones within the maze did not strike him for several years. The mechanisms of the city, he knew, cleaned relentlessly, tidying up everything from particles of dust to the bones of the animals on whom he fed. Yet the skeletons of would-be invaders of the maze were allowed to remain where they lay. Why cart away the corpse of a dead elephant-like beast that had blundered into a power snare, while leaving the remains of a dead dragon killed by the same snare? Because the dragon wore protective clothing, and so was sapient? Sapient corpses were deliberately allowed to remain, Muller realized.

As warnings. ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE.

Those skeletons were part of the psychological warfare waged against all intruders by this mindless, deathless, diabolical city. They were reminders of the perils that lurked everywhere. How the guardian drew the subtle distinction between bodies that should be left in situ and those that should be swept away, Muller

did not know; but he was convinced that the distinction was real.

He watched his screens. He eyed the tiny figures moving about the ship on the plain.

Let them come in, he thought. The city hasn't had a victim in years. It'll take care of them. I'm safe where I am.

And, he knew, if by some miracle they managed to reach him, they would not remain long. His own special malady would drive them away. They might be clever enough to defeat the maze; but they could not endure the affliction that made Richard Muller intolerable to his own species.

"Go away," Muller said aloud.

He heard the whirr of rotors and stepped from his dwelling to see a dark shadow traverse the plaza. They were scouting the maze from the air. Quickly he went indoors. Then he smiled at his own impulse to hide. They could detect him, of course, wherever he was. Their screens would tell them that a human being inhabited the labyrinth. And then, naturally, they would try to make contact with him, though unaware of his identity. After that —

Muller stiffened as a sudden overwhelming desire blazed through him. To have them come to him. To talk to men again. To break his isolation.

He *wanted* them here.

Only for an instant. After the momentary breakthrough of loneliness came the return to rationality, the chilling awareness of what it would be like to face his kind again. No, he thought. Keep out! Or die in the maze. Keep out. Keep out. Keep out.

"Right down there," Boardman said. "That's where he must be, eh, Ned? You can see the glow on the face of the tank. We're picking up the right mass, the right density, the right everything. One live man, and it's got to be Muller."

"At the heart of the maze," said Rawlins. "So he really did it!"

"Somehow." Boardman peered into the viewing tank. From a height of a couple of kilometers the structure of the inner city was clear. He could make out eight distinct zones, each with its characteristic style of architecture, its plazas and promenades, its angling walls, its tangle of streets swirling in dizzyingly alien patterns. The zones were concentric, fanning out from a broad plaza at the heart of it all, and the scoutplane's mass detector had located Muller in a row of low buildings just to the east of the plaza. What Boardman failed to make out was any obvious passage linking zone to zone. There was no shortage of blind alleys, but even from the air the true route was not apparent; what was it like trying to work inward on the ground?

It was all but impossible, Boardman knew. The master data banks in the ship held the account of those early explorers who had tried it and failed. Boardman had brought with him every scrap of information on the penetration of the maze, and none of it was very encouraging except the one puzzling but incontrovertible datum that Richard Muller had managed to get inside.

Rawlins said. "This is going to



sound naive, I know, Charles. But why don't we just come down from here and land the scoutplane in the middle of that central plaza?

"I'll show you," said Boardman.

He spoke a command. A robot drone probe detached itself from the belly of the plane and streaked across toward the city. Boardman and Rawlins followed the blunt gray metal projectile until it was only a few score meters above the tops of the buildings. Through its faceted eye they had a sharp view of the city, revealing the intricate texture of much of the stonework. Suddenly the drone probe vanished. There was a burst of incandescence, a puff of greenish smoke — and then nothing at all.

Boardman nodded. "There's still a protective field over the whole thing. It volatilizes anything that tries to get through."

"So even a bird that comes too close —"

There are no birds on Lemnos."

"Raindrops, then. Whatever falls on the city —"

"Lemnos gets no rain," said Boardman sourly. "At least not on this continent. The only thing that field keeps out is strangers. We've known it since the first expedition. Some brave men found out about that field the hard way."

"Didn't they try a drone probe first?"

Smiling, Boardman said, "When you find a dead city sitting in the middle of a desert on a dead world, you don't expect to be blown up if you land inside it. It's a forgivable sort of mistake. Except that Lemnos doesn't forgive mistakes." He ges-

tered, and the plane dropped lower, following the orbit of the outer walls for a moment. Then it rose and hovered over the heart of the city. The wrong-colored sunlight glistened off a hall of mirrors. They overflowed the city again and again, marking off a preprogrammed observation pattern.

Captain Hosteen came aft to pay his respects, a short, thick-framed man with a flat nose and coppery skin. He was a good man, Boardman knew, and ready to sacrifice a score of lives, including his own, to get into that maze.

Hosteen flicked a glance from the screen to Boardman's face and said, "Learning anything?"

"Nothing new. We have a job."

"Want to go down again?"

"Might as well," Boardman said. He looked at Rawlins. "Unless you have anything else you'd like to check, Ned."

"Me? Oh, no — no, that is — well, I wonder if we need to go into the maze at all. I mean, if we could lure Muller out somehow, talk to him outside the city —"

"No."

"Wouldn't it work?"

"No," said Boardman emphatically. "Item one, Muller wouldn't come out if we asked him. He's a misanthrope, remember? He buried himself here to get away from humanity. Why should he socialize with us? Item two, we couldn't invite him outside without letting him know too much of what we want from him. In this deal, Ned, we need to hoard our resources of strategy, not toss them away in our first move."

"I don't understand what you mean."

Patently Boardman said, "Suppose we used your approach. What would you say to Muller to make him come out?"

"Why, that we're here from Earth to ask him if he'll help us in a time of system-wide crisis. That we've encountered a race of alien beings with whom we're unable to communicate, and that it's absolutely necessary that we break through to them in a hurry, and that he alone can do the trick. We —" Rawlins stopped. Color mounted in his cheeks. He said in a hoarse voice, "Muller isn't going to give a damn for those arguments, is he?"

"No, Ned. Earth sent him a bunch of aliens once before. And they ruined him."

## V

They had come equipped for solving the problem of the maze. The ship's brain, of course, was a first-class computer, and it carried the details of all previous Earth-based attempts to enter the city. Except one, of course, and unfortunately that had been the only successful one. But records of past failures have their uses. The ship's data banks had plenty of mobile extensions: airborne and groundborne drone probes, spy-eyes, sensor batteries and more. Before any human life was risked on the maze Boardman and Hosteen would try the whole mechanical array. Mechanicals were expendable, anyway; the ship carried a set of templates, and it would be no trouble to

replicate all devices destroyed. But a point would come at which the drone probes had to give way to men. The aim was to gather as much information as possible for those men to use.

Never before had anyone tried to crack the maze this way. The early explorers had simply gone walking in, unsuspecting, and had perished. Their successors had known enough of the story to avoid the more obvious traps and had been aided to some extent by sophisticated sensory devices, but this was the first attempt to run a detailed survey before entering.

The overflights on the first day had given everybody a good visual image of the maze. Strictly speaking, it hadn't been necessary for them to leave the ground; they could have watched big-screen relays from the comfort of their camp and gained a decent idea of the conformation below, letting airborne probes do all the work. But Boardman had insisted. The mind registers things one way when it picks them off a relay screen and another when the sensory impressions are flooding in straight from the source. Now all of them had seen the city from the air and had seen what the guardians of the maze could do to a drone probe that ventured into the protective field overlying the city.

Rawlins had suggested the possibility that there might be a null spot in that protective field. Toward late afternoon they checked it out by loading a probe with metal pellets and stationing it fifty meters above the highest point of the maze. Scanner eyes recorded the action as the drone

slowly turned, spewing the pellets one at a time into preselected one-square-meter boxes above the city. Each in turn was incinerated as it fell. They were able to calculate that the thickness of the safety field varied with distance from the center of the maze; it was only about two meters deep above the inner zones, much deeper at the outer rim, forming an invisible cup over the city. But there were no null spots; the field was capable of overstrain by having the probe reloaded with pellets that were catapulted simultaneously into each of the test rectangles. The field dealt with them all, creating for a moment a single pucker of flame above the city.

At the expense of a few mole probes they found out that reaching the city through a tunnel was equally impossible. The moles burrowed into the coarse sandy soil outside the outer walls, chewed themselves passages fifty meters down, nosed upward again when they were beneath the maze. They were destroyed by the safety field while still twenty meters below ground level. A try at burrowing in right at the base of the embankments also failed; the field went straight down, apparently, all around the city.

A power technician offered to rig an interference pylon to drain the energy of the field. It didn't work. The pylon, a hundred meters tall, sucked in power from all over the planet, and blue lightning leaped and hissed along its accumulator bank, but it had no effect on the safety field. They reversed the pylon and sent a million kilowatts shoot-

ing into the city, hoping to short the field. The field drank everything and seemed ready for more. No one had any rational theory to explain the field's power source. "It must tap the planet's own energy of rotation," the technician who had rigged the pylon said, and then, realizing he hadn't contributed anything useful, he looked away and began to snap orders into the handmikes he carried.

Three days of similar researches demonstrated that the city was invulnerable to intrusion from above or below.

"There's only one way in," said Hosteen. "That's on foot, through the main gate."

"If the people in the city really wanted to be safe," Rawlins asked, "why did they leave even a gate open?"

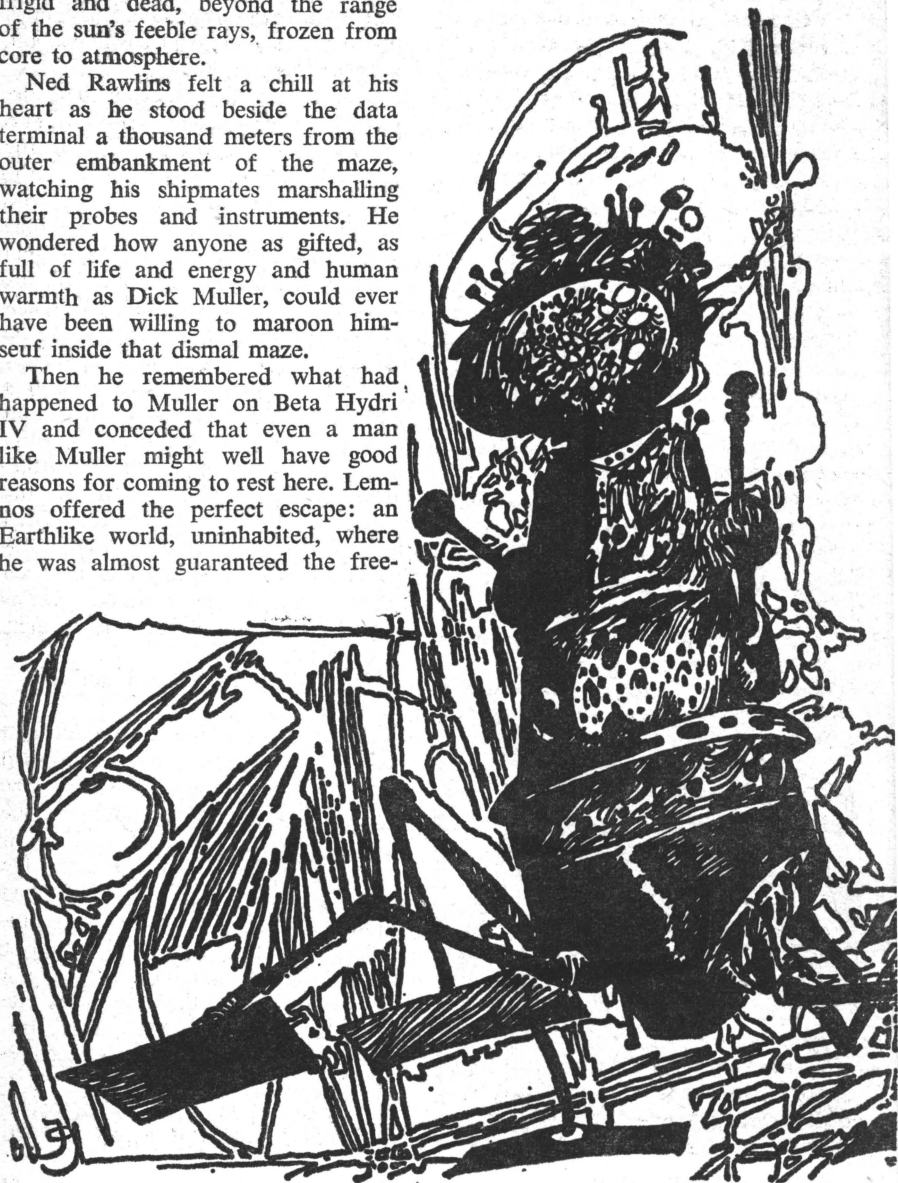
"Maybe they wanted to go in and out themselves, Ned," said Boardman quietly. "Or maybe they wanted to give invaders a sporting chance. Hosteen, shall we send some probes inside?"

The morning was gray. Clouds the color of wood smoke stained the sky; it looked almost as if rain were on the way. A harsh wind knifed the soil from the plain and sent it slicing into their faces. Behind the veil of clouds lay the sun, a flat orange disk that seemed only slightly larger than Sol as seen from Earth, though it was less than half as distant. Lemnos's sun was a gloomy M dwarf, cool and weary, an old star circled by a dozen old planets. Lemnos, the innermost, was the only one that had ever sustained life; the others were

frigid and dead, beyond the range of the sun's feeble rays, frozen from core to atmosphere.

Ned Rawlins felt a chill at his heart as he stood beside the data terminal a thousand meters from the outer embankment of the maze, watching his shipmates marshalling their probes and instruments. He wondered how anyone as gifted, as full of life and energy and human warmth as Dick Muller, could ever have been willing to maroon himself inside that dismal maze.

Then he remembered what had happened to Muller on Beta Hydri IV and conceded that even a man like Muller might well have good reasons for coming to rest here. Lemnos offered the perfect escape: an Earthlike world, uninhabited, where he was almost guaranteed the free-





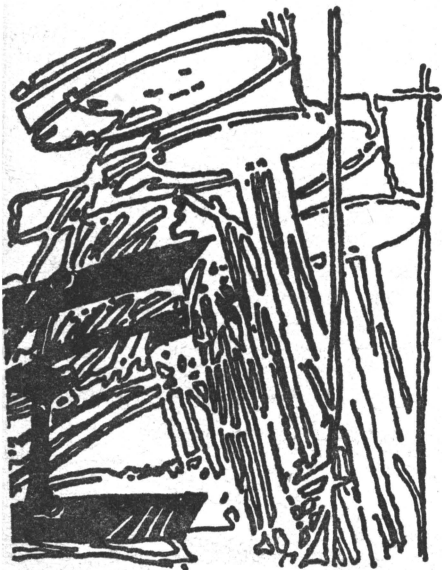
dom from human company. And we're here to flush him out and drag him away. Rawlins scowled. Dirty dirty dirty, he thought. The old thing about the ends and the means. Across the way, Rawlins could see the blocky figure of Charles Boardman standing in front of the big data terminal, waving his arms this way and that to direct the men fanning out near the walls of the city. He began to understand that he had let Boardman dragoon him into a nasty adventure. The glib old devil hadn't gone into details, back on Earth, about the exact methods by which they were going to win Muller's cooperation. Boardman had made it sound like some kind of shining crusade. Instead it was going to be a dirty trick. Boardman never went into the details of anything before he had to, Raw-

lins was coming to see. Rule one: hoard your resources of strategy. Never tip your hand. And so here I am, part of the conspiracy.

Hosteen and Boardman had deployed a dozen drones at the various entrances to the inner part of the maze. It was already clear that the only safe way into the city was through the northeast gate, but they had drones to spare and they wanted all the data they could gather. The terminal Rawlins was watching flashed a partial diagram of the maze on the screen — the section immediately in front of him — and gave him a good long time to study its loops and twists. It was his special responsibility to follow the progress of the drone through this sector. Each of the other drones was being monitored both by computer and by human observer, while Boardman and Hosteen were at the master terminal watching the progress of the entire operation all at once.

"Send them in," Boardman said.

Hosteen gave the command and the drones rolled forward through the city's gates. Looking now through the eyes of the squat mobile probe, Rawlins got his first view of what lay in Zone H of the maze. He saw a scalloped wall of what looked like puckered blue porcelain undulating away to the left and a barrier of metallic threads dangling from a thick stone slab to the other side. The drone skirted the threads, which tinkled and quivered in delicate response to the disturbance of thin air; it moved to the base of the porcelain wall and followed it at an inward-



sloping angle for perhaps twenty meters. There the wall curved abruptly back on itself, forming a sort of chamber open at the top. The last time anyone had entered the maze this way — on the fourth expedition — the two men had passed that open chamber; one had remained outside and was destroyed, the other had gone inside and was spared. The drone entered the chamber. A moment later a beam of pure red light lanced from the center of a mosaic decoration on the wall and swept over the area immediately outside the chamber.

Boardman's voice came to Rawlins through the speaker taped to his ear. "We lost four of the probes the moment they went through their gates. That's exactly as expected. How's yours doing?"

"Following the plan," said Rawlins. "So far it's okay."

"You ought to lose it within six minutes of entry. What's your elapsed time now?"

"Two minutes fifteen."

The drone was out of the chamber now and shuttling quickly through the place where the lightbeam had flashed. Rawlins keyed in olfactory and got the smell of scorched air, lots of ozone. The path divided ahead. To one side was a single-span bridge of stone arching over what looked like a pit of flame; to the other was a jumbled pile of cyclopean blocks resting precariously edge to edge. The bridge seemed far more inviting, but the drone immediately turned away from it and began to pick its way over the jumbled blocks. Rawlins asked it why, and it relayed the information that the "bridge" wasn't

there at all; it was a projection beamed from scanners mounted beneath the facing piers. Requesting a simulation of an approach anyway, Rawlins got a picture of the probe walking out onto the pier and stepping unsuspectingly through the solid-looking bridge to lose its balance; and as the simulated probe struggled to regain its equilibrium, the pier tipped forward and shucked it into the fiery pit.

Meanwhile the real probe had clambered over the blocks and was coming down the other side, unharmed. Three minutes and eight seconds had gone by. A stretch of straight road here turned out to be as safe as it looked. It was flanked on both sides by windowless towers a hundred meters high, made of some iridescent mineral, sleek and oily-surfaced, that flashed shimmering moire patterns as the drone hurried along. At the beginning of the fourth minute the probe skirted a bright grillwork like interlocking teeth and sidestepped an umbrella-shaped piledriver that descended with crushing force. Eighty seconds later it stepped around a tilt-block that opened into a yawning abyss, deftly eluded a quintet of blades that sheared upward out of the pavement, and emerged onto a sliding walkway that carried it quickly forward for exactly forty seconds more.

All this had been traversed long ago by a Terran explorer named Cartissant, since deceased. He had dictated a detailed record of his experiences within the maze. He had lasted five minutes and thirty seconds, and his mistake had come in

not getting off the walkway by the forty-first second. Those who had been monitoring him outside, back then, could not say what had happened to him after that. As his drone left the walkway, Rawlins asked for another simulation and saw a quick dramatization of the computer's best guess: the walkway opened to engulf its passenger at that point. The probe, meanwhile, was going swiftly toward what looked like the exit from this outermost zone of the maze. Beyond lay a well lit, cheerful-looking plaza ringed with drifting blobs of a pearly glowing substance.

Rawlins said, "I'm into the seventh minute, and we're still going, Charles. There seems to be a door into Zone G just ahead. Maybe you ought to cut in and monitor my screen."

"If you last two more minutes, I will," Boardman said.

The probe paused just outside the inner gate. Warily it switched on its gravitron and accumulated a ball of energy with a mass equivalent to its own. It thrust the energy ball through the doorway. Nothing happened.

The probe, satisfied, trundled toward the door itself. As it passed through, the sides of the door abruptly crashed together like the jaws of a mighty press, destroying the probe. Rawlins's screen went dark. Quickly he cut in on one of the overhead probes, which beamed him a shot of his probe lying on the far side of the door, flattened into a two-dimensional mockup of itself. A human being caught in that same trap would have been crushed to powder, Rawlins realized.

"My probe's been knocked out," he reported to Boardman. "Six minutes and forty seconds."

"As expected," came the reply. "We've got only two probes left. Switch over and watch."

The master diagram appeared on Rawlins's screen: a simplified and stylized light-pen picture of the entire maze as viewed from above. A small X had been placed wherever a probe had been destroyed. Rawlins found, after searching, the path his own drone had taken, with the X marked between the zone boundaries at the place of the clashing door. It seemed to him that the drone had penetrated farther than most of the others, but he had to smile at the childish pride the discovery brought him. Anyhow, two of the probes still were moving inward. One was actually inside the second zone of the maze, and the other was cruising through a passageway that gave access to that inner ring. The diagram vanished, and Rawlins saw the maze as it looked through the pickup of one of the drones. Almost daintily, the man-high pillar of metal made its way through the baroque intricacies of the maze, past a golden pillar that beamed a twanging melody in a strange key, past a pool of light, past a web of glittering metal spokes, past spiky heaps of bleached bones. Rawlins had only glancing views of the bones as the drone moved on, but he was sure that few were human relics. This place was a galactic graveyard for the bold.

Excitement built in him as the probe went on and on. He was so thoroughly wedded to it now that it

was as if he were inside the maze, avoiding one deathtrap after another, and he felt a sense of triumph as minutes mounted. Fourteen elapsed now. This second level of the maze was not so cluttered as the first; there were spacious avenues here, handsome colonnades, long radiating passages leading from the main path. He relaxed; he felt pride in the drone's agility and in the keenness of its sensory devices.

The shock was immense and stinging when a paving-block upended itself unexpectedly and dumped the probe down a long chute to a place where the gears of a giant mill turned eagerly.

They had not expected that probe to get so far, anyway. The one the others were watching was the one that had come in via the main gate — the safe gate. The slim fund of information accumulated at the price of many lives had guided that probe past all its perils, and now it was well within Zone G, and almost to the edge of F. Thus far everything had gone as expected; the drone's experiences had matched those of the men who had tackled this route on earlier expeditions. It followed their way exactly, turning here, dodging there, and it was eighteen minutes into the maze without incident.

"All right," Boardman said. "This is where Mortenson died, isn't it?"

"Yes," Hosteen answered. "The last thing he said was he was standing by that little pyramid, and then he was cut off."

This is where we start gaining new information, then. All we've learned

so far is that our records are accurate. This is the way in. But from here on — "

The probe, lacking a guidance pattern, now moved much more slowly, hesitating at every step to extend its network of data-gathering devices in all directions. It looked for hidden doors, for concealed openings in the pavement, for projectors, lasers, mass-detectors, power sources. It fed back to the central data banks all that it learned, thus adding to the store of information with each centimeter conquered.

It conquered, altogether, twenty-three meters. As it passed the small pyramid it scanned the broken body of the explorer Mortenson, lost at this point 72 years earlier. It relayed the news that Mortenson had been seized by a pressure-sensitive mangle activated by an unwary footstep too close to the pyramid. Beyond, it avoided two minor traps before failing to safeguard itself from a distortion screen that baffled its sensors and left it vulnerable to the descent of a pulverizing piston.

"The next one through will have to cut off all its inputs until it's past that point," Hosteen muttered. "Running through blindfolded — well, we'll manage."

"Maybe a man would do better than a machine there," said Boardman. "We don't know if that screen would muddle a man the way it did a batch of sensors."

"We're not ready yet to run a man in there," Hosteen pointed out.

Boardman agreed — none too graciously, Rawlins thought, listening to the interchange. The screen brighten-

ed again; a new drone probe was coming through. Hosteen had ordered a second wave of the machines to pick through the labyrinth, following what was now known to be the one safe access route, and several of them were at the eighteen-minute point where the deadly pyramid was located. Hosteen sent one ahead and posted the others to keep watch. The lead probe came within range of the distortion screen and cut out its sensors; it heaved tipsily for a moment, lacking any way to get its bearings, but in a moment it was stable. It was deprived now of contact with its surroundings, and so it paid no heed to the siren song of the distortion screen, which had misled its predecessor into coming within range of the pulverizing piston. The phalanx of drones watching the scene was all outside the reach of the distorter's mischief, and fed a clear, true picture to the computer, which matched it with the fatal path of the last probe and plotted a route that skirted the dangerous piston. Moments later the blind probe began to move, guided now by inner impulses; lacking all environmental feedback, it was entirely a captive of the computer, which nudged it along in a series of prods 'til it was safely around the hazard. On the far side the sensors were switched on again. To check the procedure, Hosteen sent a second drone through, likewise blinded and moving entirely on internal guidance. It made it. Then he tried a third probe with its sensors on and under the influence of the distortion screen. The computer attempted to direct it along the safe path, but the probe, bedeviled by the faulty in-

formation coming through the distorter, tugged itself furiously to the side and was smashed.

"All right," Hosteen said. "If we can get a machine past it, we can get a man past it. He closes his eyes and the computer calculates his motions step by step. We'll manage."

The lead probe began to move again. It got seventeen meters past the place of the distorter before it was nailed by a silvery grillwork that abruptly thrust up a pair of electrodes and cut loose with a bath of flame. Rawlins watched bleakly as the next probe avoided that obstacle and shortly fell victim to another. Plenty of probes waited patiently for their turns to press forward.

And soon men will be going in there too, Rawlins thought. *We'll* be going in there.

He shut off his data terminal and walked across to Boardman.

"How does it look so far?" he asked.

"Rough, but not impossible," Boardman said. "It can't be this tough all the way in."

"And if it is?"

"We won't run out of probes. We'll chart the whole maze until we know where all the danger points are, and then we'll start trying it ourselves."

Rawlins said, "Are you going to go in there, Charles?"

"Of course. So are you."

"With what odds on coming out?"

"Good ones," said Boardman. "Otherwise I doubt that I'd tackle it. Oh, it's a dangerous trip, Ned, but don't overestimate it. We've just begun to test that maze. We'll show enough in a few days more."

Rawlins considered that a moment. "Muller didn't have any probes," he said finally. "How did he survive that stuff?"

"I'm not sure," Boardman murmured. "I suppose he's just a naturally lucky man."

## VI

Within the maze Muller watched the proceedings on his dim screens. They were sending some sort of robots in, he saw. The robots were getting chewed up quite badly, but each successive wave of them seemed to reach deeper into the labyrinth. Trial and error had led the intruders to the correct route through Zone H, and well onward into G. Muller remained calm at the center of it all, going about his daily pursuits.

In the mornings he spent a good deal of time thinking over his past. There had been other worlds in other years, springtimes, warmer seasons than this; soft eyes looking into his eyes, hands against his hands, smiles, laughter, shining floors and elegant figures moving through arched doorways. He had married twice. Both times the arrangements had been terminated peacefully after a decent span of years. He had traveled widely. He had dealt with ministers and kings. In his nostrils was the scent of a hundred planets strung across the sky. We make only a small blaze, and then we go out; but in his springtime and his summer he had burned brightly enough, and he did not feel he had earned this sullen, joyless autumn.

The city took care of him, after its

fashion. He had a place to dwell, thousands of them; he moved from time to time for the sake of changing the view. All of the houses were empty boxes. He had made a bed for himself of human hides stuffed with scraped fur; he had fashioned a chair from sinews and skin; he needed little else. The city gave him water. Wild animals roamed here in such quantity that he would never lack for food so long as he was strong enough to hunt. From Earth he had brought with him certain basic items. He had three cubes of books and one of music; they made a stack less than a meter high and could nourish his soul for all the years that remained to him. He had some woman cubes. He had a small recorder into which he sometimes dictated memoirs. He had a sketchpad. He had weapons and a mass detector. He had a diagnostat with a regenerating medical supply. It was enough.

He ate regularly. He slept well. He had come almost to be content with his fate. One nurse's bitterness only so long before one grows a cyst around the place from which the poison spews.

He blamed no one now for what had happened to him.

The way stations on his journey to this place were well known to him. At eighteen he had boasted of his lofty ambitions. At twenty-five he had begun to realize them. Before he was forty he had visited a hundred worlds and was famous in thirty systems. And at the age of fifty-three he had let Charles Boardman talk him into undertaking the mission to Beta Hydri IV.

That year he was on holiday in the Tau Ceti system, a dozen light-years from home. Accompanying him was a girl he had met the year before and twenty light-years away.

Her name was Marta. She was tall, slim, with large dark eyes fashionably rimmed with red, and lustrous blue hair that brushed her smooth shoulders. She looked about twenty, though of course she might just as well have been ninety and on her third shapeup; you never could tell about anyone, and especially not about a woman. But somehow Muller suspected that she was genuinely young. It wasn't her litheness, her coltish agility — those are commodities that can be purchased — but some subtle quality of enthusiasm, of true girlishness, that he liked to think was no surgical product. Whether power-swimming or tree-floating or blowdart hunting or making love, Marta seemed so totally engaged in her pleasures that they must surely be relatively new to her.

They stayed at a hotel that was a spire of brilliance a thousand meters high, thrusting needle-straight out of a valley overlooking a glassy oval lake. Their rooms were two hundred floors up, and they dined at a rooftop eyrie reached by gravitron disk, while during the day all the pleasures of Marduk lay spread out before them. He was with her for a week, uninterrupted. The weather was perfect. On the eighth day Charles Boardman arrived on Marduk and invited Muller to pay a call on him.

"I'm on vacation," Muller said.

"Give me half a day of it. It's an important matter."

"I came here to escape important matters."

"There's never any escape, Dick. You know that. You are what you are, and we need you. Will you come?"

"Damn you," Muller said mildly.

Boardman served drinks in his suite: an amber wine out of goblets made from blue rock crystal mined on Ganymede. Then they boarded a dining capsule and left the hotel to tour the forests and lakes while they ate. Lunch glided from its container and rolled toward them as they lounged in pneumochairs before a wraparound window. Crisp salad, grilled native fish, imported vegetables; a grated Centaurine cheese to sprinkle; flasks of cold rice beer; a rich, thick, spicy green liqueur afterwards. Completely passive, sealed in their moving capsule, they accepted food and drink and scenery, breathed the sparkling air pumped in from outside, watched gaudy birds flutter past them and lose themselves in the soft, drooping needles of the thickly packed conifers of the woods.

After lunch the capsule halted by the side of a jewel-like lake, deep and clear. The wall opened and Boardman said, "Perhaps the young lady would like to swim while we get the dull business talk out of the way?"

"A fine idea," Marta said in a flat voice.

She rose, touched the disrobing snap at her shoulder, and let her garment slither to her ankles. Boardman made a great show of catching it up and putting it on a storage rack. She smiled mechanically at him, turned,

walked down to the edge of the lake.

Boardman said, "She's quite lovely, Dick. Who is she?"

"A girl. Rather young, I think."

"Younger than your usual sort, I'd say. Also somewhat spoiled. Known her long?"

"Since last year, Charles. Interested?"

Boardman gave him a Buddha-smile and gestured toward the liquor console. Muller shook his head. The two men eyed one another. They appeared to be of the same age, mid-fifties, Boardman fleshy and graying and strong-looking. Seated, they seemed of the same height, too. The appearances were deceptive: Boardman was a generation older, Muller half a foot taller. They had known each other for thirty years. In a way, they were in the same line of work, both part of the corps of non-administrative personnel that served to hold the structure of human society together across the sprawl of the galaxy. Neither had any official rank. They shared a readiness to serve, a desire to make their gifts useful to mankind, and Muller respected Boardman for the way he had used those gifts during a long and impressive career. He could not say that he liked the older man, though. He knew that Boardman was shrewd, unscrupulous and dedicated to human welfare — and the combination of dedication and unscrupulousness is always a dangerous one.

Boardman drew a vision cube from a pocket of his tunic and put it on the table before Muller. It sat there like a counter in some intricate game, six or seven centimeters along each

face, soft yellow against the polished black marble face of the table. "Plug it in," Boardman suggested. "The viewer's beside you."

Muller slipped the cube into the receptor slot. From the center of the table there rose a larger cube, nearly a meter across. Images flowered on its faces. Muller saw a cloud-wrapped planet, soft gray in tone; it could have been Venus. The view deepened and streaks of dark red appeared in the gray. Not Venus, then. The recording eye pierced the cloud layer and revealed an unfamiliar, not very Earthlike planet. The soil looked moist and spongy, and rubbery trees that looked like giant toadstools thrust upward from it. It was hard to judge relative sizes, but they looked big. Their pale trunks were coarse with shredded fibers and curved like bows between ground and crown. Saucerlike growths shielded the trees at their bases, ringing them for about a fifth of their height. Above were neither branches nor leaves, only wide flat caps whose undersurfaces were mottled by corrugated processes.

As Muller watched, three alien figures came strolling through the somber grove. They were elongated, almost spidery, with clusters of eight or ten jointed limbs depending from their narrow shoulders. Their heads were tapered and rimmed with eyes. Their nostrils were vertical slits flush against the skin. Their mouths opened at the sides. They walked upright on elegant legs that terminated in small globe-like pedestals instead of feet. Though they were nude except



for probably ornamental strips of fabric tied between their first and second wrists, Muller was unable to detect signs either of reproductive apparatus or of mammalian functions. Their skins were unpigmented, sharing the prevailing grayness of this gray world, and were coarse in texture, with a scaly overlay of small diamond-shaped ridges.

With wonderful grace the three figures approached three of the giant toadstools and scaled them until each stood atop the uppermost saucerlike projection of a tree. Out of the cluster of limbs came one arm that seemed specially adapted; unlike the others, which were equipped with five tendril-shaped fingers arranged in a circlet, this limb ended in a needle-sharp organ. It plunged easily and deeply into the soft rubbery trunk of the tree on which its owner stood. A long moment passed, as if the aliens were draining sap from the trees. Then they climbed down and resumed their stroll, outwardly unchanged.

One of them paused, bent, peered close to the ground. It scooped up the eye that had been witnessing its activities. The image grew chaotic; Muller guessed that the eye was being passed from hand to hand. Suddenly there was darkness. The eye had been destroyed. The cube was played out.

After a moment of troubled silence Muller said, "They look very convincing."

"They ought to be. They're real."

"Was this taken by some sort of extragalactic probe?"

"No," Boardman said. "In our own galaxy."

"That be Beta Hydri IV, then?"

"Yes."

Muller repressed a shiver. He activated the cube a second time. Again the eye made the descent through the cloud layer; again it observed the rubbery trees; again the trio of aliens appeared, took nourishment from the trees, noticed the eye, destroyed it. Muller studied the images with cold fascination. He had never looked upon living sapient beings of another creation before. No one had, so far as he knew, until now.

The images slowly faded from the cube.

Boardman said, "That was taken less than a month ago. We parked a drone ship fifty thousand kilometers up and dropped roughly a thousand eyes onto Beta Hydri IV. At least half of them went straight to the bottom of the ocean. Most landed in uninhabited or uninteresting places. This is the only one that actually showed us a clear view of the aliens."

"Why have we decided to break our quarantine of this planet?"

Boardman slowly let out his breath. "We think it's time we got in touch with them, Dick. We've been sniffing around them for ten years and we haven't said hello yet. This isn't neighborly. And since the Hydrans and ourselves are the only intelligent races in this whole damned galaxy, unless something's hiding somewhere unlikely, we've come to the belief that we ought to commence friendly relations."

"I don't find your coyness very appealing," Muller said bluntly. "A full-scale council decision was taken

after close to a year of debate, and it was voted to leave the Hydrans alone for at least a century unless they showed some sign of going into space. Who reversed that decision, and why, and when?"

Boardman smiled his crafty smile. "I didn't mean to seem deceptive, Dick. The decision was reversed by a council session eight months ago, while you were out Rigel way."

"And the reason?"

One of the extragalactic probes came back with convincing evidence that there's at least one highly intelligent and quite superior species in one of our neighboring clusters."

"Where?"

"It doesn't matter, Dick. Pardon me, but I won't tell you at this time. Let's just say that from what we know of them now, they're much more than we can handle. They've got a galactive drive, and we can reasonably expect them to come visiting us one of these centuries, and when they do we'll have a problem. So it's been voted to open contact with Beta Hydri IV ahead of schedule, by way of having some insurance against that day."

"You mean"" Muller said, "that we want to make sure we're on good terms with the other race of our own galaxy before the extragalactics show up?"

"Exactly."

"I'll take that drink now," said Muller.

Boardman gestured. Muller tapped out a potent combination on the console; downed it quickly, ordered another. Suddenly he had a great deal to digest.

For a couple of centuries man had explored the stars without finding a trace of a rival. There were plenty of planets, and many of them were potentially habitable, and a surprising number were Earthlike to four or five places. That much had been expected; the sky is full of main-sequence suns, with a good many of the F-type and G-type stars most likely to support life. The process of planetogenesis is nothing remarkable, and most of those suns had complements of five to a dozen worlds, some of them were of the right size and mass and density slots to permit the retention of atmosphere and the convenient evolution of life, and a number of those worlds were situated within the orbital zone where they were best able to avoid extremes of temperature. So life abounded, and the galaxy was a zoologist's delight.

But in his helter-skelter expansion out of his own system, man had found only the traces of former intelligent species. The most spectacular ancient site was the maze of Lemnos; but other worlds too had their stumps of cities, their weathered foundations, their burial grounds and strewn potsherds. Space became an archeologist's delight, too. The collectors of alien animals and the collectors of alien relics were kept busy. Whole new scientific specialties burst into being. Societies that had vanished before the Pyramids had been conceived now underwent reconstruction.

A curious blight of extinction had

come upon all of the galaxy's other intelligent races, though. Evidently they had flourished so long ago that not even their decadent children survived: they were one with Nineveh and Tyre, blotted out, cut off. Careful scrutiny showed that the youngest of the dozen or so known extrasolar intelligent cultures had perished eighty thousand years earlier.

The galaxy is wide, and man kept on looking, drawn to find his stellar companions by some perverse mixture of curiosity and dread. Though the warp drive provided speedy transport to all points within the universe, neither available personnel nor available ships could cope with the immensity of the surveying tasks. Several centuries after his intrusion into the galaxy, man was still making discoveries, some of them quite close to home. The star Beta Hydri had seven planets; and on the fourth was another sapient species.

There were no landings. The possibility of such a discovery had been examined well in advance, and plans had been drawn to avoid a blundering trespass of unpredictable consequences. The survey of Beta Hydri IV had been carried out from beyond its cloud layer. Cunning devices had measured the activity behind that tantalizing gray mask. Hydran energy production was known to a tolerance of a few million kilowatts; Hydran urban districts had been mapped and their population density estimated; the level of Hydran industrial development had been calculated by a study of thermal radiations. There was an aggressive, growing, potent civilization down there, probably

comparable in technical level to late twentieth-century Earth. There was only one significant difference: the Hydrans had not begun to enter space. That was the fault of the cloud layer. A race that never has seen the stars is not likely to show much desire to reach them.

Muller had been privy to the frantic conferences that followed the discovery of the Hydrans. He knew the reasons why they had been placed under quarantine, and he realized that only much more urgent reasons had resulted in the lifting of that quarantine. Unsure of its ability to handle a relationship with non-human beings, Earth had wisely chosen to keep away from the Hydrans for a while longer; but now all that was changed.

"What happens now?" Muller asked. "An expedition?"

"Yes."

"How soon?"

"Within the next year, I'd say."

Muller tensed. "Under whose leadership?"

"Perhaps yours, Dick."

"Why perhaps?"

"You might not want it?"

"When I was eighteen," Muller said, "I was with a girl out in the woods on Earth, in the California forest preserve, and I told her that I was going to discover things out in space, that men were going to remember me the way they remember Columbus and Magellan and the early astronauts and all. And that was the night I grew my ambitions." He laughed. "There are things we can say at eighteen, but not again."

"There are things we can do at eighteen that we can't do again either," said Boardman. "Well, Dick? You're past fifty now, right? You've walked in the stars. Do you feel like a god?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you want to go to Beta Hy-dri IV?"

"You know I do?"

"Alone?"

Muller felt the ground give way before him, and abruptly it seemed to him that he was taking his first spacewalk again, falling freely toward all the universe. "Alone?"

"We've programmed the whole thing and concluded that to send a bunch of men down there at this point would be a mistake. The Hy-drans haven't responded very well to our eye probes. You saw that: they picked the eye up and smashed it. We can't begin to fathom their psychologies, because we've never been up against alien minds before. But we feel that the safest thing, both in terms of potential manpower loss and in terms of impact on their society, is to send a single ambassador down there to them, one man, coming in peace, a shrewd, strong man who has been tested under a variety of stress situations and who will develop ways of initiating contact. That man may find himself chopped to shreds thirty seconds after making contact. On the other hand, if he survives he'll have accomplished something utterly unique in human history. It's your option."

It was irresistible. Mankind's ambassador to the Hydrans! To go alone, to walk alien soil and extend

humanity's first greeting to cosmic neighbors —

It was his ticket to immortality. It would write his name forever on the stars.

"How do you figure the chances of survival?" Muller asked.

"The computation is one chance in sixty-five of coming out whole, Dick. Considering that it's not an Earthtype planet to any great degree, so you'll need a life-support system, and you may get a chilly reception. One in sixty-five."

"Not too bad."

"I'd never accept such odds myself," Boardman said, grinning.

"No, but I might." He drained his glass. To carry it off meant imperishable fame. To fail, to be slain by the Hydrans, even that was not so dreadful. He had lived well. There were worse fates than to die bearing mankind's banner to a strange world. That throbbing pride of his, that hunger for glory, that childlike craving for renown that he had never outgrown, drove him to it.

Marta reappeared. She was wet from her swim, her nude body glossy, her hair plastered to the slender column of her neck. She might have been a leggy fourteen-year-old, Muller thought, looking at her narrow hips, her lean thighs. Boardman tossed her a drier. She thumbed it and stepped into its yellow field, making one complete turn. She took her garment from the rack and covered herself unhurriedly. "That was great," she said. Her eyes met Muller's for the first time since her return. "Dick, what's the matter

with you? You look wide open — stunned. Are you all right?"

"Fine."

"What happened?"

"Mr. Boardman's made a proposition."

"You can tell her about it, Dick. We don't plan to keep it a secret. There'll be a galaxy-wide announcement right away."

"There's going to be a landing on Beta Hydri IV," Muller said in a thick voice. "One man. Me. How will it work, Charles? A ship in a parking orbit, and then I go down in a powered drop-capsule equipped for return?"

"Yes."

Marta said, "It's insane, Dick. don't do it." "

"It's a quick death if things don't work out, Marta. I've taken worse risks before." "

"No. Look, sometimes I think I've got a little precog. I see things ahead, Dick." She laughed nervously, her pose of cool sophistication abruptly shattering. "If you go there, I don't think you'll live, either. Say you won't go. Say it, Dick!"

"You've never officially accepted the proposition," Boardman said.

"I know," Muller said. He got to his feet, nearly reaching the low roof of the dining capsule, and walked toward Marta and put his arms around her. He held her firmly. She looked at him in horror. He kissed the tip of her nose and the lobe of her left ear. She shrank away from him, stumbled, nearly plunged into Boardman's lap. Boardman caught her and held her. Muller said, "You know what the answer has to be."

That afternoon one of the robot probes reached Zone F. They still had a distance to go; but it would not be long, Muller knew, before they were at the heart of the maze.

## VIII

"There he is," Rawlins said. "At last!"

Via the drone probe's eyes he stared at the man in the maze. Muller leaned casually against a wall, arms folded, a big weatherbeaten man with a harsh chin and a massive wedge-shaped nose. He did not seem at all alarmed by the presence of the drone.

Rawlins cut in the audio pickup and heard Muller say, "Hello, robot. Why are you bothering me?"

The probe, of course, did not reply. Neither did Rawlins, who could have piped a message to him through the drone. He stood by the data terminal, crouching a little for a better view. His weary eyes throbbed. It had taken them nine local-time days to get one of their probes all the way through the maze to the center. The effort had cost them close to a hundred probes; each inward extension of the safe route by twenty meters or so had required the expenditure of one of the robots. Still, that wasn't so bad, considering that the number of wrong choices in the maze was close to infinite. Through luck, the inspired use of the ship's brain and a study battery of sensory devices, they had managed to avoid all of the obvious traps and most of the cleverer ones. And now they were in the center.

Rawlins had been up all night,

monitoring this critical phase, the penetration of Zone A. Hosteen had gone to sleep. So, finally, had Boardman. A few of the crewmen were still on duty, here and aboard the ship, but Rawlins was the only member of the civilian complement still awake.

He wondered if the discovery of Muller had been supposed to take place during his stint. Probably not: Boardman wouldn't want to risk blowing things by letting a novice handle the big moment. Well, too bad; they had left him on duty, and he had moved his probe a few meters inward, and now he was looking right at Muller.

Muller looked sad around the eyes, and his lips were compressed in a taut, tense line. Rawlins had been expecting something more dramatic, something romantic, some mirror of agony on that face. Instead he saw only the craggy, indifferent, almost insensitive-looking features of a tough, durable man in late middle age. Muller had gone gray, and his clothing was a little ragged; he looked worn and frayed himself. But that was only to be expected of a man who had been living this kind of exile for nine years.

"What do you want?" Muller asked the probe. "Who sent you? Why don't you go away?"

Rawlins did not dare to answer at this point. Brusquely he keyed the probe to freeze while he sped away toward the dome where Boardman slept.

Boardman was sleeping under a canopy of life-sustaining devices.

He was, after all, at least eighty years old, though he certainly didn't look it, and one way to keep from looking it was to plug one's self into one's sustainers every night. Strapped to Boardman's forehead were a couple of meningeal electrodes that guaranteed a proper and healthy progression through the levels of sleep, thus washing the mind of the day's fatigue poisons. An ultrasonic drawcock filtered dregs and debris from Boardman's arteries. Hormone flow was regulated by the ornate webwork hovering above his chest. The whole business was linked to and directed by the ship's brain. Within the elaborate life system Boardman looked unreal and waxy. His breathing was slow and regular; his soft lips were slack; his cheeks seemed puffy and loose-fleshed. Boardman's eyeballs were moving rapidly beneath the lids, a sign of dreaming, of upper sleep. Could he be awakened safely now?

Rawlins feared to risk it. Not directly, anyway. He ducked out of the room and activated the terminal just outside. "Take a dream to Charles Boardman," Rawlins said. "Tell him we found Muller. Tell him he's got to wake up right away. Say, Charles, Charles, wake up, we need you. Got it?"

"Acknowledged," said the ship's brain.

The impulse leaped from dome to ship, was translated into response-directed form, and returned to the dome. Rawlins's message seeped into Boardman's mind through the electrodes on his forehead. Rawlins entered the old man's sleeproom again.

Boardman stirred. His hands formed claws and scraped gently at the machinery in whose embrace he lay.

"Muller — " he muttered.

His eyes opened. For a moment he did not see. But the waking process had begun, and the life system jolted his metabolism sufficiently to get him functioning again. "Ned?" he said hoarsely. "What are you doing here? I dreamed that — "

"It wasn't a dream, Charles. I programmed it for you. We got through to Zone A. We found Muller."

Boardman undid his system and sat up instantly, alert, aware. "What time is it?"

"Dawn's just breaking."

"And how long ago did you find him?"

"Perhaps fifteen minutes. I froze the probe and came right to you. But I didn't want to rush you awake, so — "

"All right. All right." Boardman had swung out of bed, now. He staggered a little as he got to his feet. He wasn't yet at his daytime vigor, Rawlins realized; his real age was showing. He found an excuse to look away, studying the life system to avoid having to see the meaty folds of Boardman's body.

"Let's go," Boardman said. "Unfreeze that probe. I want to see him right away."

Using the terminal in the hall, Rawlins brought the probe back to life. The screen showed them Zone A of the maze, cozier-looking than the outer reaches. Muller was not in view.

"Must have walked out of sight range," Rawlins said. He moved the probe in a standing circle, taking in a broad sweep of low cubical houses, high-rising archways, and tiered walls. A small catlike animal scampered by, but there was no sign of Muller.

"He was right over there," Rawlins insisted unhappily. "He — "

"All right. He didn't have to stay in one place while you were waking me up. Walk the probe around."

Rawlins activated the drone and started it in a slow cruising exploration of the street. Muller abruptly stepped out of a windowless building and planted himself in front of the probe.

"Again," he said. "Back to life, are you? Why don't you speak up? What's your ship? Who sent you?"

"Should we answer?" Rawlins asked.

"No."

Boardman's face was pressed almost against the screen. He pushed Rawlins's hands from the controls and went to work on the fine tuning himself, until Muller was sharply in focus. Boardman kept the probe moving, sliding around in front of Muller, as though trying to hold the man's attention and prevent him from wandering off again.

In a low voice Boardman said, "That's frightening. The look on his face — "

"I thought he looked pretty calm."

"What do you know? I remember that man. Ned, that's a face out of hell. His cheekbones are twice as sharp as they used to be. His eyes are awful. You see the way his mouth turns down, on the left side?"

He might even have had a light stroke. But he's lasted well enough, I suppose."

Muller, keeping pace with the drone, said in a deep, gruff voice, "You've got thirty seconds to state your purpose here. Then you'd better turn around and get going back the way you came."

"Won't you talk to him?" Rawlins asked. "He'll wreck the probe."

"Let him," said Boardman. "The first person who talks to him is going to be flesh and blood, and he's going to be standing face to face with him. That's the only way it can be. This has to be a courtship, Ned. We can't go through the speakers of a probe."

"Ten seconds," said Muller.

He reached into his pocket and came out with a glossy black metal globe the size of an apple, with a small square window on one side. Rawlins had never seen anything like it before. Perhaps it was some alien weapon Mueller had found in this city. Swiftly Muller raised the globe and aimed the window at the face of the drone probe.

The screen went dark.

"Looks like we've lost another probe," Rawlins said.

Boardman nodded. "Yes. The last probe we're going to lose. Now we start losing men."

## IX

The maze now was thoroughly mapped. The ship's brain held a detailed picture of the inward route, with all the known pitfalls charted, and Boardman was confident that he

could send drones in with a 95% probability of getting them to Zone A unharmed. Whether a man could cover that same route with equal safety was what remained to be seen. Even with the computer whispering hints to him every step of the way, a man filtering information through a fallible, fatigue-prone human brain might not quite see things the same way as a lathe-turned probe, and perhaps would make compensations of his own in the course that would prove fatal. So the data they had gathered had to be tested carefully before they went in.

There were volunteers for that.

They knew that were likely to die. No one had tried to pretend otherwise to them, and they would have it no other way. It had been put to them that it was important for humanity to bring Richard Muller voluntarily out of the maze and that it could best be accomplished by having specific human beings — Charles Boardman and Ned Rawlins — speak to Muller in person, and that since Boardman and Rawlins were non-replaceable units it was necessary for others to explore the route ahead of them. Very well. The explorers were ready, knowing that they were expendable.

They drew lots for the job.

The man chosen to go first was a lieutenant named Burke, who looked fairly young and probably was, since military men rarely went in for shape-ups until they were in the top echelons. He was a short, sturdy dark-haired man who acted as if he could be replaced from a template aboard the ship, which was not the case.



"When I find Muller," Burke said — he did not say *if* — "I tell him I'm an archeologist, right? And that if he doesn't mind I'd like some of my friends to come inside also?"

"Yes," said Boardman. "And remember, the less you say to him in the way of professional-sounding noises, the less suspicious he's going to be."

Burke was not going to live long enough to say anything to Richard Muller, and all of them knew it. But he waved good-bye jauntily, somewhat stagily, and strode into the maze. Through a backpack he was connected with the ship's brain. The computer would relay his marching orders to him and would show the watchers in the camp exactly what was happening to him.

He moved smartly and smoothly past the terrors of Zone H. He lacked the array of detection devices that had helped the probes find the pivot-mounted slabs and the deathpits beneath, the hidden energy flares, the clashing teeth set in doorways and all the other nightmares; but he had something much more useful riding with him: the accumulated knowledge of those nightmares, gathered through the expenditure of a lot of probes that had failed to notice them. Boardman, watching his screen, saw the by now familiar pillars and spokes and escarpments, the airy bridges, the heaps of bones, the occasional debris of a drone probe.

Burke took nearly forty minutes to pass from Zone H to Zone G. So far the guidance system was working well. Burke was executing a sort of

grim ballet, dancing around the obstacles, counting his steps, now leaping, now turning sideways, now straining to step over some treacherous strip of pavement. But the computer was unable to warn him about the small toothy creature waiting a top a gilded ledge forty meters inside Zone G. It was no part of the maze's design. It was a random menace, transacting business on its own account.

The animal was no bigger than a very large cat, but its fangs were long and its claws were quick. The eye in Burke's backpack saw it as it leaped, but by then it was too late. Burke, half-warned, half-turned and reached for his weapon with the beast already on his shoulders and scrambling for his throat.

Burke tumbled to the ground, clutching at his attacker. A trickle of blood spurted. Man and beast rolled over twice, tripped some secret waiting relay and were engulfed in a gust of oily smoke. When the air was clear again neither of them was in view.

Boardman said a little later, "There's something to keep in mind. The animals wouldn't bother attacking a probe. We'll have to carry mass detectors and travel in teams."

That was how they worked it the next time. Two men named Marshall and Petrocelli, armed, went together into the maze. No animal could come near them without telling its thermal output into the infrared pickups of the mass detectors they carried. They shot four animals, one of them immense, and had no trouble otherwise.

Deep within Zone G they came to the place where the distortion screen made a mockery of all information-gathering devices.

How did the screen work, Boardman wondered? He knew of Earth-made distorters that operated directly on the senses, taking perfectly proper sensory messages and scrambling them within the brain to destroy all one-to-one correlations. But this screen had to be different. It could not attack the nervous system of a drone probe, for the drones had no nervous systems in any meaningful sense of that term, and their eyes gave accurate reports of what they saw. Somehow what the drones had seen — and what they had reported to the computer bore no relation to the computer — bore no relation to the real geometry of the maze at that point. Other drones, posted beyond the range of the screen, had given entirely different and much more reliable accounts of the terrain. So the thing must work on some direct optical principle, working on the environment itself, rearranging it, blurring perspective, subtly shifting and concealing the outlines of things, transforming normal configurations into bafflement. Any sight organ within reach of the screen's effect would obtain a wholly convincing and perfectly incorrect image of the area, whether or not it had a mind to be tinkered with.

Marshall and Petrocelli did as the computer said. They walked forward even where their own eyes told them that vast abysses lay in their path. They crouched to wriggle through a tunnel whose roof was bright with

the suspended blades of guillotines. The tunnel did not exist. "Any minute I expect one of those blades to fall and chop me in half," Petrocelli said. There were no blades. At the end of the tunnel they obediently moved to the left, toward a massive flail that lashed the ground in vicious swipes. There was no flail. Reluctantly they did not set foot on a plumply upholstered walkway that appeared to lead out of the region of the screen. The walkway was imaginary; they had no way of seeing the pit of acid that actually was there.

"It would be better if they simply closed their eyes," Boardman said. "The way the drones went through — minus all visuals."

"They claim it's too scary to do it like that," said Hosteen.

"Which is better: to have no visual information or to have the wrong information?" Boardman asked. "They could follow the computer's orders just as well with their eyes closed. And there'd be no chance that —"

Petrocelli screamed. On the split screen Boardman saw the real configuration — a flat, innocuous strip of road — and the screen-distorted one relayed by the backpack eyes — a sudden geyser of flame erupting at their feet.

"Stand where you are!" Hosteen bellowed. "It isn't real!"

Petrocelli, one foot high in the air, brought it back into place with a wrenching effort. Marshall's reaction time was slower. He had been whirling to escape the eruption when Hosteen was called to him, and he turned to the left before he halted. He was a dozen centimeters too far

out of the safe road. A coil of bright metal flicked out of a block of stone and wrapped itself about his ankles. It cut through the bone without difficulty. Marshall toppled and a flashing golden bar stapled him to a wall.

Without looking back, Petrocelli passed through the column of flame unharmed, stumbled forward ten paces and came to a halt, safe beyond the effective range of the distortion screen. "Dave?" he said hoarsely. "Dave, are you all right?"

"He stepped off the path," said Boardman. "It was a quick finish."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Stay put, Petrocelli. Get calm and don't try to go anywhere. I'm sending Chesterfield and Walker in after you."

It took them close to an hour to reach the place of the distortion screen and nearly fifteen minutes to shuffle through the few square meters the screen controlled. They did it with their eyes closed, and they didn't like that at all; but the phantoms of the maze could not frighten blind men, and in time Chesterfield and Walker were beyond their grasp. Petrocelli was much calmer by then. Warily, the three continued toward the heart of the maze.

## X

They were winning the battle of the maze. Fourteen men had entered it so far. Four were dead. Walker and Petrocelli had made camp in Zone E; five more men had set up a relief base in F; three others were currently edging past the distortion screen in G and soon would join them. The worst was over for these.

It was clear from the probe work that the curve of danger dropped off sharply past Zone F, and that there were practically no hazards at all in the three inner zones. With E and F virtually conquered, it should not be difficult to break through to those central zones where Muller, impassive and uncommunicating, lurked and waited.

Rawlins felt that he knew the maze completely by now. Vicariously he had entered it more than a hundred times, first through the eyes of the probes, then through the relays from the crewmen. At night in feverish dreams he saw its dark patterns, its curving walls and sinuous towers. Locked in his own skull he somehow made the circuit of that labyrinth, kissing death a thousand times. He and Boardman would be the beneficiaries of hard-won experience when their turns came to go inside.

Their turns were coming near.

On a chill morning under an iron sky he stood with Boardman just outside the maze, by the upsloping embankment of soil that rimmed the outer flange of the city. In the short weeks they had been here, the year had dimmed almost startlingly toward whatever winter this planet got. Sunlight lasted only six hours a day, now, out of the twenty; two hours of pale twilight followed, and dawns were thin and prolonged. The whirling moons danced constantly in the sky, playing twisting games with shadows.

On the screen they watched Muller moving at the heart of the maze. The hovering probes kept constant check on him, marking his peregrinations

with a shifting line on the master chart. Muller had not left Zone A since the time he had met the drone, but he changed positions daily in the labyrinth, migrating from house to house as though he feared to sleep in the same one twice.

Tapping the screen, Boardman said, "This afternoon we go inside, Ned. We'll spend the night in the main camp. Tomorrow you move forward to join Walker and Petrocelli in E. The day after that you go on alone toward the middle and find Muller."

"Why are you going inside the maze, Charles?"

"To help you."

"You could keep in touch with me from out here," said Rawlins. "You don't need to risk yourself."

Boardman tugged thoughtfully at his dewlap. "What I'm doing is calculated for minimum risk this way."

"How?"

"If you get into problems," Boardman said, "I'll need to go to you and give you assistance. I'd rather wait in Zone F if I'm needed than have to come rushing in suddenly from the outside, through the most dangerous part of the maze. You see what I'm telling you? I can get to you quickly from F without much danger. But not from here."

"What kind of problems?"

"Stubbornness from Muller. He's got no reason to cooperate with us, and he's not an easy man to deal with. I remember him in those months after he came back from Beta Hydri IV. We had no peace with him. He was never actually level-tempered be-

fore, but afterward he was a volcano. Mind you, Ned, I don't judge him for it; he's got a right to be furious with the universe. But he's troublesome. He's a bird of ill omen. Just to go near him brings bad luck. You'll have your hands full."

"Why don't you come with me, then?"

"Impossible," Boardman said. "It would ruin everything if he even knew I was on this planet. I'm the man who sent him to the Hydrans, don't forget. I'm the one who in effect marooned him on Lemnos. I think he might kill me if he saw me again."

Rawlins recoiled from that idea. "No. He hasn't become that barbaric."

"You don't know him. What he was. What he's become."

"If he's as full of demons as you say, how am I ever going to win his trust?"

"Go to him. Look guileless and trustworthy. You don't have to practice that, Ned. You've got a naturally innocent face. Tell him you're here on an archeological mission. Don't let him know that we realized he was here all along. Say that the first you knew was when our probe stumbled into him. That you recognized him, from the days when he and your father were friends. Tell him that your father's dead and that this is your first expedition to space. Work on his sympathies, Ned. Dig for the paternal in him."

Rawlins shook his head. "Don't get angry with me, Charles, but I've got to tell you that I don't like any of this. These lies."

"Lies?" Boardman's eyes blazed.

"Lies to say that you're your father's son? That this is your first expedition?"

"That I'm an archeologist?"

Boardman shrugged. "Would you rather tell him that you came here as part of a search mission looking for Richard Muller? Will that help win his trust? Think about our purpose, Ned."

"Yes. Ends and means. I know."

"Do you, really?"

"We're here to win Muller's cooperation because we think that he alone can save us from a terrible menace," Rawlins said stolidly, unfeelingly, flatly. "Therefore we must take any approach necessary to gain that cooperation."

"Yes. And I wish you wouldn't smirk when you say it."

"I'm sorry, Charles. But I feel so damned queasy about deceiving him."

"We need him."

"All right, Charles."

"I need you, too," Boardman said.

"If I could do this myself, I would. But if he saw me, he'd finish me. In his eyes I'm a monster. It's the same with anyone else connected with his past career. But you're different. He might be able to trust you. You're young, you look so damned virtuous, and you're the son of a friend of his. You can get through."

"And fill him up with lies so we can trick him."

Boardman closed his eyes. He seemed to be containing himself with an effort.

"Stop it, Ned."

"Go on. Tell me what I do after I've introduced myself."

"Build a friendship with him. Take your time about it. Make him come to depend on your visits." "

"What if I can't stand being with him?"

"Conceal it. Show that you can tolerate his company. Make the effort. Chat with him. Make it clear to him that you're stealing time from your scientific work — that the villainous bastards who are running your expedition don't want you to have anything to do with him, but that you're drawn to him by love and pity and won't let them interfere. Tell him all about yourself — your ambitions, your love life, your hobbies, what ever you want. Run off at the mouth. It'll reinforce the image of the naive kid."

"Do I mention the galactics?" Rawlin asked.

"Not obtrusively. Work them in somewhere, by way of bringing him up to date on current events. But don't tell him too much. Certainly don't tell him of the threat they pose. Or a word about the need we have for him, you understand. If he gets the idea that he's being used, we're finished."

"How will I get him to leave the maze, if I don't tell him why we want him?"

"Let that part pass for now," Boardman said. "I'll coach you in the next phase after you've succeeded in getting him to trust you."

"The translation," Rawlins said, "is that you're going to put such a whopper in my mouth that you don't dare tell me now what it is, for fear I'll throw up my hands and quit."

"Ned — "

"I'm sorry. But look, Charles, why do we have to *trick him out*? Why can't we just say that humanity needs him and force him to come out?"

"Do you think that's morally superior to tricking him out?"

"It's cleaner, somehow. I hate all this dirty plotting and scheming. I'd much rather help knock him cold and haul him from the maze than have to go through what you've planned."

Boardman said, "We can't force him out. It's too risky. He might find some way to kill himself the moment we tried to grab him."

"A stungun," said Rawlins. "I could do it, even. Just get within range and gun him down, and then we carry him out of the maze and when he wakes up we explain —"

Boardman vehemently shook his head. "He's had nine years to figure out that maze. We don't know what tricks he's learned or what defensive traps he's planted. For all we know he's programmed the whole place to blow up if someone pulls a gun on him. He's got to come out of that labyrinth of his own free will, Ned, and that means we have to trick him with false promises. I know it stinks. The whole universe stinks, sometimes. Haven't you discovered that yet?"

"It doesn't *have* to stink!" Rawlins said sharply, his voice rising. "Is that the lesson you've learned in all those years? The universe doesn't stink. Man stinks! He'd rather stink than smell sweet. We don't *have* to lie. We don't *have* to cheat. We could opt for honor and decency and —" Rawlins stopped abruptly. In a different tone he said, "I sound

young as hell to you, don't I, Charles?"

"You're entitled to make mistakes," Boardman said. "That's what being young is for."

"You genuinely believe and know that there's a cosmic malevolence in the workings of the universe?"

Boardman touched the tips of his thick, short fingers together. "I wouldn't put it that way. There's no personal power of darkness running things, any more than there's a personal power of good. The universe is a big impersonal machine. As it functions it tends to put stress on some of its minor parts, and those parts wear out, and the universe doesn't give a damn about that, because it can generate replacements. There's nothing immoral about wearing out parts, but you have to admit that from the point of view of the part under stress, it's a stinking deal. It happened that two small parts of the universe clashed when we dropped Dick Muller onto the planet of the Hydrans. We had to put him there because it's our nature to find out things, and they did what they did to him because the universe puts stress on its parts, and the result was that Dick Muller came away from Beta Hydri IV in bad shape. He was drawn into the machinery of the universe and get ground up. Now we're having a second clash of parts, equally inevitable, and we have to feed Muller through the machine a second time. He's likely to be chewed again, which stinks, and in order to push him into a position where that can happen, you and I have to stain our

souls a little, which also stinks, and yet we have absolutely no choice in the matter. If we don't compromise ourselves and trick Dick Muller, we may be setting in motion a new spin of the machine that will destroy all of humanity, and that would stink even worse. I'm asking you to do an unpleasant thing for a decent motive."

"Where's the room for free will in this mechanical universe of yours, Charles?"

"There isn't any. That's why I say the universe stinks."

"Have you felt this way all your life?"

"Most of it," Boardman said.

"When you were my age?"

"Even earlier."

Rawlins stared at the screen. "Let's go inside," he said. "I'm tired of waiting."

## XI

Muller saw them coming closer, and he did not understand why he was so calm about it. He had destroyed that robot, yes, and after that they had stopped sending robots in. But his viewing tanks showed him the men camping in the outer levels. He could not see their faces clearly. He could not see what they were doing out there. He counted about a dozen of them, give or take two or three; some were settled in Zone E, and a somewhat larger group in F. Muller had seen a few of them die in the outer zones.

He had ways of attacking. He could, if he cared to, flood Zone E with backup from the aqueduct. He had done that once, by accident, and

it had taken the city almost a full day to clean things up; he recalled how during the flood Zone E had been sealed off, bulkheaded to keep the water from spilling out. If the intruders did not drown in the first rush, they would certainly blunder in alarm into some of the traps. Muller could do other things, too, to keep them from getting to the inner city.

Yet he did nothing. He knew that at the heart of his inaction was a hunger to break his years of isolation. Much as he hated them, much as he feared them, much as he dreaded the puncturing of his privacy, Muller allowed the men to work their way toward him.

Muller had spent part of a year among the Hydrans; and then, seeing he was accomplishing nothing, he entered his powered drop-capsule, rode it into the heavens, and repossessed his orbiting ship. If the Hydrans had a mythology, he would become part of it.

Within his ship Muller went through the operations that would return him to Earth. As he notified the ship's brain of his presence he caught sight of himself in the burnished metal plate of the input bank, and it frightened him, a little. The Hydrans did not use mirrors. Muller saw deep new lines etched on his face, which did not bother him, and he saw a strangeness in his eyes, which did. The muscles are tense, he told himself. He finished programming his return and went to the medic chamber and ordered a forty-db drop in his neural level, along with a hot bath and a thorough massage. When he came out his eyes still looked

strange and he had sprouted a facial tic, besides. He got rid of the tic easily enough, but he could do nothing about his eyes.

The ship gulped power from the nearest designated donor star. The ship's rotors whirled along the axes of warp, and Muller along with his plastic and metal container was hurled out of the universe on one of the shortcut routes.

He had no work to do. The ship duly popped from warp within the prescribed limits, 100,000 kilometers out from Earth, and colored lights flashed on his communications board as the nearest traffic station signalled for his bearings.

"Match velocities with us, Mr. Muller, and we'll send a pilot aboard to get you to Earth," the traffic controller said.

Muller's ship took care of it. The coppery globe of the traffic station appeared in sight.

"We have a relay message for you from Earth," the controller said. "Charles Boardman calling."

"Go ahead," said Muller.

Boardman's face filled the screen. He looked pink and newly buffed, quite healthy, well rested. "Dick," he said. "God, it's great to see you again!"

Muller activated tactile and put his hand on Boardman's wrist through the screen. "Hello, Charles. One in sixty-five, eh? Well, I'm back."

"Should I tell Marta?"

"Marta," Muller said, thinking for a moment. Yes. The blue-haired wench with the swivel hips and the sharp heels. "Yes. Tell Marta. It

would be nice if she met me when I landed."

Boardman laughed. Then he said, "How did it go?"

"Poorly."

"You made contact, though?"

"I found the Hydrans, yes. They didn't kill me."

"Yes, but —"

"I'm alive, Charles." Muller felt the tic beginning again. "I didn't learn their language. I can't tell you if they approved of me. They seemed quite interested. They studied me closely for a long time. They didn't say a word."

"What are they, telepaths?"

"I can't tell you that, Charles."

Boardman was silent for awhile. "What did they do to you, Dick?"

"Nothing."

"That isn't so."

"What you're seeing is battle fatigue," Muller said. "I'm in good shape, just a little stretched in the nerve. I want to breathe real air and drink some real beer and taste real meat, and I'd like to have some company in bed, and I'll be as good as ever."

"How's the gain on your broadcast system, Dick?"

"Huh?"

"You're coming across too loud," said Boardman.

"Blame it on the relay station. Jesus, Charles. What does the gain on my system have to do with anything?"

"I'm not sure," Boardman said. "I'm just trying to find out why you're shouting at me."

"I'm not shouting," Muller shouted.



Soon after that they broke contact. Muller had word from the traffic station that they were ready to send a pilot aboard. He got the hatch ready and let the man in. The pilot was a very blond young man with hawklike features and pale skin. As soon as he unhelmeted he said, "My name is Les Christiansen, Mr. Muller, and I want to tell you that it's an honor and a privilege for me to be the pilot for the first man to visit an alien race. I hope I'm not breaking security when I say that I'd love to know a little about it while we're descending. I mean, this is sort of a moment in history, me being the first to see you in person since you're back, and if it's not an intrusion I'd be grateful if you'd tell me just some of the — highlights — of your — of —"

"I guess I can tell you a little," Muller said affably. "First did you see the cube of the Hydrans? I know it was supposed to be shown, and—"

"You mind if I sit down a second, Mr. Muller?"

"Go ahead."

"I feel very woozy," said Christiansen. "I don't know what's happening." His face was crimson, suddenly, and beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. "I think I must be getting sick." The pilot crumpled into a webfoam cradle and huddled there, shivering, covering his head with his hands. Muller hesitated helplessly. Finally he reached down to take the man's elbow and guide him toward the medic chamber. Christiansen whirled away as if touched by fiery metal. The motion pulled him off balance and sent him into a heap on

the cabin floor. He rose to his knees and wriggled until he was as far away from Muller as it was possible to get. In a strangled voice he said, "Where is it?"

"That door there."

Christiansen rushed for it, sealed himself in, and rattled the door to make sure of it. Muller, astonished, heard retching sounds and then something that could have been a series of dry sobs. He was about to signal the traffic station that the pilot was sick when the door opened a little and Christiansen said muffledly, "Would you hand me my helmet, Mr. Muller?"

Muller gave it to him.

"I'm going to have to go back to my station, Mr. Muller."

"I'm sorry you reacted this way. Christ, I hope I'm not carrying some kind of contagion."

"I'm not sick. I just feel — lousy." Christiansen fastened the helmet in place. "I don't understand. But I want to curl up and cry. Please let me go, Mr. Muller. It — I — that is — it's terrible, that's what I feel!" He rushed into the hatch. In bewilderment Muller watched him cross the void to the nearby traffic station.

He got on the radio. "You better not send another pilot over just yet," Muller told the controller. Christiansen folded up with instant plague as soon as he took his helmet off. I may be carrying something. Let's check it out."

The controller, looking troubled, agreed. He asked Muller to go to his medic chamber, set up the diagnostic, and transmit its report. A little while later the solemn chocolate-hued

face of the station's medical officer appeared on Muller's screen and said, "This is very odd, Mr. Muller. I've run your diagnostat transmission through our machine. No unusual symptoms. I've also put Christiansen through the works without learning anything. He feels fine now, he says. He told me that an acute depression hit him the moment he saw you, and it deepened in a hurry to a sort of metabolic paralysis. That is, he felt so gloomy that he could hardly function."

"Is he prone to these attacks?"

"Never," the medic replied. "I'd like to check this out myself. May I come over?"

The medic didn't curl up with the miseries as Christiansen had done. He didn't stay long, either, and when he left his face was glossy with tears. He looked as baffled as Muller. When the new pilot appeared, twenty minutes later, he kept his suit on as he programmed the ship for planetary descent. Sitting rigidly upright at his controls, his back turned to Muller, he said nothing, scarcely acknowledged Muller's presence. As required by law, he brought the ship down until its drive system was in the grip of a groundside landing regulator, and took his leave. Muller saw the man's face, tense, sweatshiny, tight-lipped. The pilot nodded curtly and went through the hatch. I must have a very bad smell, Muller thought, if he could smell it through his suit like that.

The landing was routine.

At the starport he cleared Immigration quickly. He had feared that

the giant starport diagnostat would detect whatever malady he carried that his own equipment and the traffic station medic had failed to find; but he passed through the bowels of the machine, letting it bounce sonics off his kidneys and extract some molecules of his various bodily fluids, and at length he emerged without the ringing of bells and the flashing of warning lights. *Approved.* He spoke to the customs machine. Where from, traveler? Where bound? *Approved.* His papers were in order. A slit in the wall widened into a doorway, and he stepped through, for the first time since his landing confronting another human being.

Boardman had come to meet him. Marta was with him. Her hair was short and sea-green; she had silvered her eyes and gilded the slender column of her throat, so that she looked like some jeweled statuette of herself.

Boardman's hand encircled Muller's wrist in a firm greeting that incredibly turned flabby within seconds. The hand slipped away even before Muller could return the embrace. "It's good to see you, Dick," Boardman said without conviction, stepping back a couple of paces. His cheeks seemed to sag as though under heavy gravitational stress. Marta slipped between them and pressed herself against him. Muller did not kiss her. Her eyes were dazzling as he looked within them and felt himself lost in rebounding mirror images. Her nostrils flared. Through her thin flesh he felt muscles bridling. She was trying to get free of him. "Dick," she whispered. "I've prayed for you every night. You don't know how I missed you." She

struggled harder. She turned her head to one side. He put his cheek against her delicate ear. "Dick," she murmured, "I feel so strange — so glad to see you that I'm all tangled up inside — let go, Dick, I feel queasy somehow —"

Yes. Yes. Of course. He released her.

Boardman, sweating, nervous, mopped at his face, jabbed himself with some soothing drug, fidgeted, paced. Muller had never seen him look this way before. "Suppose I let the two of you have some time together, eh?" Boardman suggested, his voice coming out half an octave too high. "The weather's been getting to me, Dick. I'll talk with you tomorrow. Your accommodations are all arranged." Boardman fled. Now Muller felt panic rising.

"Where do we go?" he asked.

"There's a transport pod outside. We have a room at the Starport Inn."

Marta was chewing at the corner of her lower lip. He took her by the hand, and they rode the sidewalk out of the terminal room, to the transportation pods. Go on, he thought. Tell me that you don't feel well. Tell me that mysteriously you've come down with something in the last ten minutes.

"Why did you cut your hair?" he asked.

"It's a woman's right. Don't you like it this way?"

"Not as much." They entered the pod. "Longer, bluer, it was like the sea on a stormy day." The pod shot off on a bath of quicksilver. She kept far to her side, hunched against the hatch. "And the make-up, too. I'm sorry, Marta. I wish I could like it."

"I was prettifying for your homecoming."

"Why are you doing that with your lip?"

"What am I doing?"

"Nothing," he said. "Here we are. The room is booked already?"

"In your name, yes."

They went in. He put his hand on the registration plate. It flashed green, and they headed for the lift-shaft. The inn began in the fifth sub-level of the starport and went down for fifty levels; their room was near the bottom. Choice location, he thought. The bridal suite, maybe. They stepped into a room with kaleidoscopic hangings and a wide bed with all accessories. The roomglow was tactfully dim. Muller thought of months of woman cubes and a savage throbbing rose in him. She moved past him into the personal room, and was in there a long while.

When she came out all the tricky make-up was gone, and her hair was blue again.

"Like the sea," she said. "I'm sorry I couldn't grow it back in there. The room wasn't programmed for it."

"It's much better now." He studied her. "The Hydrans," he said, "have either five sexes or none, I'm not sure which. That's a measure of how well I got to know them while I was there. However they do it, I think people have more fun. Why are you standing over there, Marta?"

Silently she came toward him. She quivered a little, like a shy mare wanting to bolt. He put his lips to her lips, and they were dry, taut, hostile. They sat side by side on the bed.

He saw pain rise in her eyes.

"Tell me what's wrong, Marta."

"I don't know."

"You're acting like you're sick."

"I think I am."

"When did you start feeling ill?"

"I — oh, Dick, why all these questions? Please, love, come close."

"You don't want me to."

"I'm trying to make you happy, Dick. It — it hurts so much — so much —"

"What does?"

She wouldn't answer. She gestured wantonly and tugged at him again. He sprang from the bed.

"Dick, Dick, I warned you not to go. I said I had some precog. And that other things could happen to you there besides getting killed."

"Tell me what hurts you."

"I can't. I — don't know."

"That's a lie."

"When did it start?"

"This morning. When I got up."

"That's another lie. I have to have the truth!"

"Make love to me, Dick. I can't wait much longer. I —"

"You what?"

"Can't — stand —"

"Can't stand what?"

"Nothing. Nothing." She was off the bed too, rubbing against him, a cat in heat, shivering, muscles leaping in her face, eyes wild.

He caught her wrists and ground the bones together.

"Tell me what it is you can't stand much longer, Marta."

She gasped. He squeezed harder.

"Tell me," he said. "You can't stand —"

— being near you," she said.

Within the maze the air was somehow warmer and sweeter. The walls must cut off the winds, Rawlins thought. He walked carefully, listening to the voice at his ear.

*Turn left . . . three paces . . . put your right foot beside the black stripe on the pavement . . . pivot . . . turn left . . . four paces . . . ninety-degree turn to the right . . . immediately make a ninety-degree turn to the right again . . .*

It was like a children's street game. Step on a crack, break your mother's back. The stakes were higher here, though. He moved cautiously, feeling death nipping at his heels. Ahead an energy flare spurted across the path. The computer called off the timing for him. *One, two, three, four, five, GO!* Rawlins went.

Safe.

On the far side he halted flatfooted and looked back. Boardman was keeping pace with him, unslowed by age. Boardman waved and winked. He went through the patterns, too. *One, two, three, four, five, GO!* Boardman crossed the place of the energy flare.

Rawlins could not help looking at the bones. Dry skeletons ages old, and some bodies that were not old at all. Beings of many races had perished here.

What if I die in the next ten minutes?

Bright lights were flashing now, on and off many times a second. Boardman, five meters behind him, became an eerie figure moving in disconnected movements, as though

every other fraction of a second had simply been punched out of his awareness.

The computer told him! *Walk ten paces and halt. One. Two. Three. Walk ten paces and halt. One. Two. Three. Walk ten paces and halt.*

Rawlins could not remember what would happen to him if he failed to keep to the proper timing. Here in Zone H the nightmares were so thick that he could not keep them straight in his mind. Was this the place where a ton of stone fell on the unwary? Where the walls came together? Where a cobweb-dainty bridge delivered victims to a lake of fire?

His estimated life-span at this point was two hundred five years. He wanted to have most of these years. I am too uncomplicated to die yet, Ned Rawlins thought.

He danced to the computer's tune, past the lake of fire, past the clashing walls.

Something with long teeth perched on the lintel of the door ahead. Carefully Charles Boardman unslung the gun from his backpack and cut in the proximity-responsive target finder. He keyed it for 30 kilograms of mass and downward, at 50 meters. "I've got it," he told Rawlins, and fired.

The energy bolt splashed against the wall. Streaks of shimmering green sprouted along the rich purple. The beast leaped, limbs outstretched in a final agony, and fell. From somewhere came three small scavengers that began to rip it savagely into the finest shreds.

Images played on a golden screen bracketed to a wall near the inner end of Zone H. Rawlins saw his father's face take form, coalesce with an underlying pattern of bars and crosses, burst into flame. The screen was externally primed; what it showed was in the eye of the beholder. The drones, passing this point, had seen only the blank screen. Rawlins watched the image of a girl appear. Maribeth Chambers, sixteen years old, sophomore in Our Lady of Mercies High School, Rockford, Illinois. Maribeth Chambers smiled shyly and began to remove her clothes.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life," said Maribeth Chambers in a husky, passionate voice.

She beckoned. She gave him a bedroom wink. She giggled. She wriggled. She heaved her shoulders and made her breasts ring like tolling bells.

Her skin turned deep green. Her eyes slid about in her face. Her lower lip stretched forth like a shovel. Her thighs began to melt. Patterns of flame danced on the screen. Rawlins heard deep throbbing ponderous chords from an invisible organ. He listened to the whispering of the brain that guided him and went past the screen unharmed.

The screen showed abstract patterns: a geometry of power, rigid-marching lines and frozen figures. Charles Boardman paused to admire it for a moment.

Then he moved on.

A forest of whirling knives near the inner border of Zone H.

The heat grew strangely intense. One had to tiptoe over the pavement. This was troublesome because none who had passed this way before had experienced it. Did the route vary? Could the city introduce variations? How hot would it get? Where would the zone of warmth end? Did cold lie beyond? Would they live to reach Zone E? Was Richard Muller doing this to prevent them from entering?

Maybe he recognizes Boardman and is trying to kill him. There is that possibility. Muller has every reason to hate Boardman, and he has had no chance to undergo social adjustment. Maybe I should move faster and open some space between Boardman and myself. It seems to be getting hotter. On the other hand, he would accuse me of being cowardly. And disloyal.

Maribeth Chambers would never have done those things.

Do nuns still shave their heads?

Boardman found the distortion screen deep inside Zone G perhaps the worst of all. He was afraid of entering a place where the evidence of his senses did not correspond to the real universe. Boardman depended on his senses. He was wearing his third set of retinas. You can make no meaningful evaluations of the universe without the confidence that you are seeing it clearly. Now he was within the field of the distortion screen.

Parallel lines met here. The triangular figures emblazoned on the moist, quivering walls were constructed entirely of obtuse angles. A river





ran sideways through the valley. The stars were quite close and the moons orbited one another.

What we now must do is close our eyes and not be deceived.

*Left foot. Right foot. Left foot. Right foot. Move to the left slightly slide your foot. Back toward the right. That's it. Start walking again.*

Forbidden fruit tempted him. All his life he had tried hard to see clearly. The lure of distortions was irresistible. Boardman halted, planting each foot firmly. If you hope to get out of this, he told himself, you will keep your eyes closed. If you open your eyes you will be misled and go to your death.

Boardman remained quite still. The silent voice of the computer tried to prod him on.

"Wait," said Boardman quietly. "I can look around a little if I don't move. You can't get into trouble if you don't move."

The ship's brain reminded him of the geyser of flame that had sent Marshall to his death.

Boardman opened his eyes. All about him he saw the negation of geometry. This was the inside of the Klein bottle, looking out. Disgust rose like a green column within him.

You are eighty years old and you know how the universe should look. Close your eyes now, C.B. Close your eyes and move along. You're taking undue risks.

First he sought Ned Rawlins. The boy was twenty meters ahead of him, shuffling slowly past the screen. Eyes closed? Of course. All of them. Ned was an obedient boy. Or a frightened one.

Boardman began to lift his right leg, checked himself, reimplanted it on the pavement. Just ahead, pulsations of golden light leaped in the air, taking now the form of a swan, now the form of a tree. Ned Rawlins's left shoulder rose too high. His back was humped. One leg moved forward, and the other moved backward. Through golden mists Boardman saw the corpse of Marshall stapled to the wall. Marshall's eyes were wide open. Looking into those eyes Boardman saw his own curving reflection, all nose, no mouth. He closed his eyes.

The computer, relieved, directed him onward.

*A sea of blood. A cup of lymph.  
To die, not having loved —*

*This is the gateway to Zone F. I am now leaving death's other kingdom. Where is my passport? Do I need a visa? I have nothing to declare. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.*

On the far side of the gateway Rawlins stopped short and asked the computer if it were safe for him to squat and rest. The brain said that it was. Gingerly, Rawlins lowered himself, rocked on his heels a moment, touched his knee of the cool pebble-textured pavement. He looked back. Behind him, colossal blocks of stone set without mortar and fit to a perfect truing were piled fifty meters high, flanking a tall narrow aperture through which the solid form of Charles Boardman now was passing. Boardman looked sweaty and flustered. Rawlins found that fascinating. He had never seen the old man's smugness pierced before.

Rawlins himself was none too steady. Metabolic poisons boiled in the tubes and channels of his body. He was drenched with perspiration so thoroughly that his clothing was working overtime to get rid of it, distilling the moisture and volatilizing the substratum of chemical compounds.

Boardman came alongside and squatted. Rawlins had to steady him as he balanced before kneeling.

Rawlins said, "Muller came this way alone and made it."

"Muller was always an extraordinary man."

"How do you think he did it?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I mean to," Rawlins said. "Perhaps by this time tomorrow I'll be talking to him."

"They'll be coming out to meet us soon. They should have fixes on us by now. We must be showing up on their mass detectors. Up, Ned. Up."

They stood. Once again Rawlins led the way.

In Zone F things were less cluttered but also less attractive. The prevailing mood of the architecture was taut, with a fussy line that generated a tension of mismatched objects. Though he knew that traps were fewer here, Rawlins still had the sensation that the ground was likely to open beneath him at any given moment. The air was cooler here. It had the same sharp taste as the air on the open plain. At each of the street intersections rose immense concrete tubes in which jagged, feathery plants were standing.

"Which is the worst part for you so far?" Rawlins asked.



"The distortion screen," said Boardman.

"That wasn't so bad. Unless you feel peculiar about walking through stuff this dangerous with your eyes closed.

"I peeked," said Boardman.

"In the distortion zone?"

"Just for a moment. I couldn't resist it, Ned."

Rawlins smiled. He wanted to congratulate Boardman on having done something silly and dangerous and human, but he didn't dare. He said, "What did you do? Just stand still and peek and then move on?"

"I forgot myself and started to take a step, but I didn't follow through. I kept my feet planted and looked around."

"Maybe I'll try to try that on the way out," Rawlins said. "Just one little look can't hurt."

"How do you know the screen's effective in the other direction?"

Rawlins frowned. "I never considered that. We haven't tried to go *outward* through the maze yet. Suppose it's altogether different coming out? We don't have charts for that direction. What if we all get clipped coming out?"

"We'll use the probes again," said Boardman. "Don't worry about that. When we're ready to go out, we'll bring a bunch of drones to the camp in Zone F here, and check the exit route the same way we checked the entry route."

After a while Rawlins said, "Why should there be any traps on the outward route, anyway? That means the builders of the maze were locking themselves in as well as locking

enemies out. Why would they do that?"

"Who knows, Ned? They were aliens."

### XIII

Boardman remembered that the conversation was incomplete. He said, "And which had been the worst place for you so far?"

"That other screen further back," Rawlins said. "The one that shows you all the nasty, crawling stuff inside your own mind."

"Which screen is that?"

"Toward the inside of Zone H. It was a golden screen fastened to a high wall with metal strips. I looked at it and saw my father, for a couple of seconds, and then I saw a girl I once knew, a girl who became a nun. On the screen she was taking her clothes off."

"I didn't see any such things."

"You couldn't miss it. It was, oh, about fifty meters after the place where you shot the first animal. A little to your left, halfway up the wall, a rectangular screen, a trapezoidal screen, really, with bright white metal borders, and colors moving on it, shapes —"

"Yes. That one. Geometrical shapes."

"I saw Maribeth getting undressed," Rawlins said, sounding confused. "And you saw geometrical shapes?"

Zone F could be deadly too. A small pearly blister in the ground opened, and a stream of gleaming pellets rolled out. They flowed toward Rawlins. They moved with

the malevolent determination of a stream of hungry soldier ants. They stung the flesh. He trampled a number of them, but in his annoyance and fervor he almost came too close to a suddenly flashing blue light. He kicked three pellets toward the light, and they melted.

Boardman had already had much more than enough.

Their elapsed time out from the entrance to the maze was only one hour and forty-eight minutes, although it seemed much longer than that. The route through Zone F led into a pink-walled room where jets of steam blew up from concealed vents. At the far end of the room was an iris slot. If you did not step through it with perfect timing, you would be crushed. The slot gave access to a long low-vaulted passageway, oppressively war mand close, whose walls were blood-red in color and pulsated sickeningly. Beyond the passageway was an open plaza in which six slabs of white metal stood on end like waiting swords. A fountain hurled water a hundred meters in the air. Flanking the plaza were three towers with many windows, all of different sizes. Prismatic spotlights played against the windows. No windows were broken. On the steps of one of the towers lay the articulated skeleton of a creature close to ten meters long. The bubble of what was undoubtedly a space helmet covered its skull.

Alton, Antonelli, Cameron, Greenfield and Stein constituted the Zone F camp, the relief base for the forward group. Antonelli and Stein

went back to the plaza in the middle of F and found Rawlins and Boardman there.

"It's just a short way on," Stein said. "Would you like to rest a few minutes, Mr. Boardman?"

Boardman glowered. They went on. Antonelli said, "Davis, Ottavio and Reynolds passed on to E this morning when Alton, Cameron and Greenfield reached us. Petrocelli and Walker are reconnoitering along the inner edge of E and looking a little way into D. They say it looks a lot better in there."

The relief base consisted of a pair of extrusion domes side by side in a little open spot at the edge of a garden. The site had been thoroughly researched and no surprises were expected. Rawlins entered one of the domes and took his shoes off. Cameron handed him a cleanser. Greenfield gave him a food pack.

Boardman came into the dome. It amazed Rawlins how durable and tireless the old man was. Boardman said, laughing, "Tell Captain Hosteen he lost his bet. We made it."

"What bet?" asked Antonelli.

Greenfield said, "We think that Muller must be tracking us somehow. His movements have been very regular. He's occupying the back quadrant of Zone A, as far from the entrance as possible, if the entrance is the one he uses, and he swings around in a little arc balancing the advance party."

Boardman said, "Hosteen gave three to one we wouldn't get here. I heard him." To Cameron, who was a communications technician, Boardman said, "Do you think it's possible

that Muller is using some kind of scanning system?"

"It's altogether likely."

"Good enough to see faces?"

"Maybe some of the time. We really can't be sure. He's had a lot of time to learn how to use this maze, sir."

"If he sees my face," said Boardman, "we might as well just go home without bothering. I never thought he might be therming us. Who's got the thermoplastics? I need a new face fast."

He did not try to explain. But when he was finished he had a long sharp nose, lean, downcurving lips, and a witch's chin. It was not an attractive face. But it was not the face of Charles Boardman, either.

After a night of unsound sleep Rawlins prepared himself to go on to the advance camp in Zone E. Boardman would not be going with him, but they would be in direct contact at all times now. Boardman would see what Rawlins saw and hear what Rawlins heard. And in a tiny voice Boardman would be able to convey instructions to him.

The morning was dry and wintry. They tested the communications circuits. Rawlins stepped out of the dome and walked ten paces, standing alone looking inward and watching the orange glow of daylight on the pockmarked porcelain-like walls before him. The walls were deep black against the lustrous green of the sky.

Boardman said, "Lift your right hand if you hear me, Ned."

Rawlins lifted his right hand.

"Now go ahead and speak to me."

"Where did you say Richard Muller was born?"

"On Earth. I hear you very well."

"Where on Earth?"

"The North American Directorate, somewhere."

"I'm from there," Rawlins said.

"Yes, I know. I think Muller is from the western part of the continent."

"Should I get started now?"

"Listen to me, first. We've been very busy getting ourselves inside this place, and I don't want you to forget that everything we've done up to this point has been a preliminary to our real purpose. We're here for Muller, remember."

"Would I forget?"

"We've been preoccupied with matters of personal survival. That can tend to blur your perspective; whether you yourself, individual individual, live or die. Now we take a larger view. What Richard Muller has whether it's a gift or a curse, is of high potential value; and it's your job to gain use of it, Ned. The fate of galaxies lies on what happens in the next few days between you and Muller. Eons will be reshaped. Billions yet unborn will have their lives altered for good or ill by the events at hand."

"You sound absolutely serious, Charles."

"I absolutely am. Sometimes there comes a moment when all the booming foolish inflated words mean something, and this is one of those moments. You're standing at a crossroads in galactic history. And therefore, Ned, you're going to go in

there and lie and cheat and perjure and connive, and I expect that your conscience is going to be very sore for a while, and you'll hate yourself extravagantly for it, and eventually you'll realize that you've done a deed of heroism. The test of your communications equipment is now ended. Get back inside here and let's ready you to march."

He went alone only a short distance this time. Stein and Alton accompanied him as far as the gateway to Zone E. There were no incidents. They pointed him in the right direction, and he passed through a pinwheeling shower of coruscating azure sparks to enter the austere, funeral zone beyond. As he negotiated the uphill ramp of the entrance he caught sight of a socket mounted in an upright stone column. Within the darkness of the socket was something mobile and gleaming that could have been an eye.

"I think I've found part of Muller's scanning system," Rawlins reported. "There's a thing watching me in the wall."

"Cover it with your spray," Boardman suggested.

"I think he'd interpret that as a hostile act. Why would an archeologist mutilate a feature like that?"

"Yes. A point. Proceed."

There was less of an air of menace about Zone E. It was made up of dark, tightly compacted low buildings that clung together like bothered turtles; Rawlins could see different topography ahead, high walls and a shining tower. Each of the zones was so different from all the others

that he began to think they had been built at different times: a core of residential sectors, and then a gradual accretion of trap-laden outer rings as the enemies grew more troublesome. It was the sort of thought an archeologist might have; he filed it for use.

He walked a little way and saw the shadowy figure of Walker coming toward him. Walker was lean, dour, cool. He was about forty, a career man.

"Glad you made it, Rawlins. Go easy there on your left. That wall is hinged."

"Everything all right here?"

"More or less. We lost Petrocelli about an hour ago."

Rawlins stiffened. "This zone is supposed to be safe!"

"It isn't. It's riskier than F, and nearly as bad as G. We underestimated it when we were using the probes. There's no real reason why the zones *have* to get safer toward the middle, is there? This is one of the worst."

"To lull us," Rawlins suggested. "False security."

"You bet. Come on, now. Follow me and don't use your brain too much. There's no value in originality in here. You go the way the path goes, or you don't go anywhere."

Rawlins followed. He saw no apparent danger, but he jumped where Walker jumped, and he detoured where Walker detoured. Not too far on lay the inner camp. He found Davis, Ottavio, and Reynolds there, and also the upper half of Petrocelli.

"You going on into D today?"

Walker asked with a keen interest."

"I may as well."

"We'll tell you what to avoid. It's new. That's where Petrocelli got it, right near the entrance to D, maybe five meters this side. You trip a field of some kind and it cuts you in half. The drones didn't trip it at all."

"Suppose it cuts everything in half that goes by?" Rawlins asked. "Except drones."

"It didn't cut Muller," Walker said. "It won't cut you if you step around it. We'll show you how."

"And beyond?"

"That's all up to you."

Boardman said, "If you're tired, stay here for the night."

"I'd rather go on."

"You'll be going alone, Ned. Why not be rested?"

"Ask the brain for a reading on me. See where my fatigue level is. I'm ready to go onward."

Boardman checked. They were doing full telemetry on Rawlins; they knew his pulse rate, respiration count, hormone levels and many more intimate things. The computer saw no reason why Rawlins could not continue without pausing.

"All right," said Boardman. "Go on."

"I'm about to enter Zone D, Charles. This is where Petrocelli got it. I see the tripline — very subtle, very well hidden. Here I go past it. Yes. Ye-es. This is Zone D. I'm stopping and letting the brain get my bearings for me. Zone D looks a little cozier than E. The crossing shouldn't take long."

Auburn flames guarded Zone C. They were frauds.

Rawlins said softly, "Tell the galaxies that their fate is in good hands. I should find Muller in fifteen minutes."

## TO BE CONCLUDED

### This Month in Galaxy —

#### GOBLIN RESERVATION

*Tomorrow's world, where goblins and banshees live in protected reserves — and a man tries to solve his own death!*

by Clifford D. Simak

#### THE RICHES OF EMBARRASSMENT

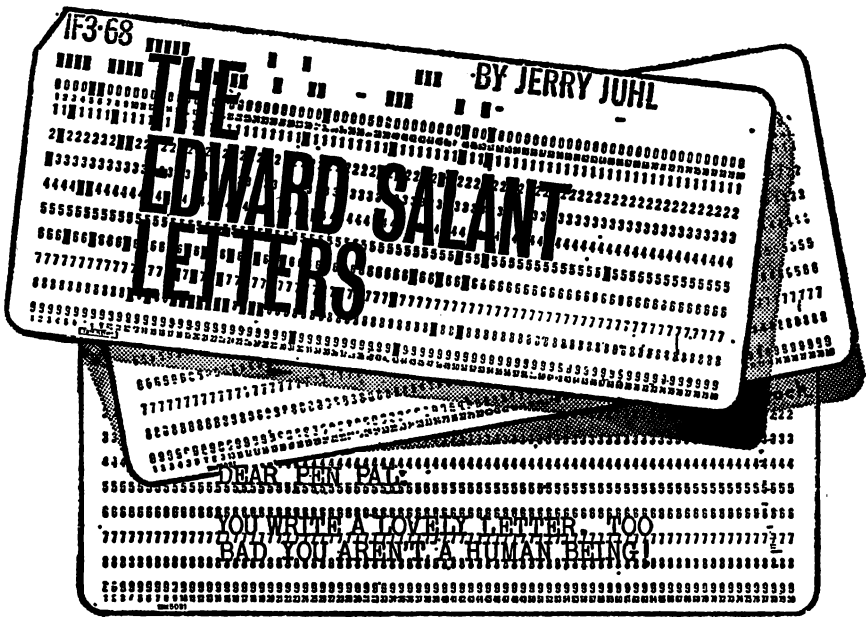
by H. L. Gold

#### THE WORLD AND THORINN

by Damon Knight

*Algis Budrys, Willy Ley and many more!*

Don't miss the April GALAXY — on sale now!



TO: American Business  
 Equipment, Inc.  
 5541-62-838  
 New York, New York  
 FROM: Edward Salant

August 19

On April 5 of this year I purchased from your company a Phonotyper model 519. Since I know you will be interested in such matters, I have gone to the trouble of finding the serial number of my particular unit, which is B-8954-01-901.

Finding this number was in itself no small feat. Indeed it took me well over twenty minutes, by the end of which I was in downright intimate terms with your machine. However,

this is irrelevant. Annoying, but irrelevant.

I have found the Phonotyper to be an extremely useful piece of equipment. Since I write for a living, I am most happy to be freed from the idiosyncrasies of my old electric typewriter (a machine which fought me at all turns.) Now it is a joy to settle myself in a comfortable chair with my feet up and speak into the Phonotyper microphone. I love the little happy hum that comes from the next room as the transcriber puts down my words at the incredible rate of 27 characters per second. I only wish I could express myself as fast as your machine can type the words.

## AN IF FIRST

Each month *If* brings you a new writer, never before published. This month's is Jerry Juhl, a 29-year-old New Yorker who began his career as a puppeteer with a TV program in California and is now writer and puppeteer with *The Muppets*, the macabre stick-and-string comedians that have brightened network television shows for the past few years. A graduate of San Jose State College, Juhl is in Europe as this is written but will be back soon with *The Muppets* — and, we hope, with us!

However, there is a fly in the ointment — or possibly in the silicone lubricant. After about three months of use, the Phonotyper began playing games with me. Occasionally it would slip in a “then” when I had said “than.” Or, when it thought I wasn't watching, it would turn one of my “shoulds” into a “would.” This latter example actually occurred in an important business letter, and since the mistake was not caught, it caused no end of trouble.

I have had one of your servicemen call twice. Each time he vowed the trouble had been corrected, but each time it wasn't.

I am writing this with the hope that you might have something constructive to suggest.

Sincerely,  
Edward Salant  
7250-48-006  
St. Louis, Mo.

TO: Edward Salant  
7250-48-006  
St. Louis, Mo.

FROM: American Business  
Equipment, Inc.

August 25

Dear Mr. Salant:

We have received your letter of August 19.

We deeply regret that you have had difficulty with your Phonotyper 519.

The 519 is the product of over fifteen years' research by a company well known for its fine business equipment. Still, it is a new machine, based on new and radically different concepts in the fields of electronic and mechanical engineering. Because of this, a certain amount of adjustment is sometimes necessary for the unit to function flawlessly.

We suggest that the problem may be a phonetic one. Remember that each Phonotyper must be set to the personal speech patterns and regional dialect of its user.

We therefore recommend that you refer to the new revised and expanded instruction manual which is enclosed. With this, you should be able to make the necessary adjustment for your personal local patterns.

If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,  
The American  
Business Equipment,  
Inc.

Incoming letter scanned by:  
Circuits 2746-34 Cobol 27  
Outgoing decisions by:  
674-36 Redar circuits 319  
Transcribed by  
740  
ENCL.

TO: American Business  
Equipment, Inc.  
FROM: Edward Salant

September 1

Thank you for your courteous letter of August 25. I was pleased to receive the new expanded instruction manual.

I must tell you that at first I was skeptical of your advice. Because I am a playwright, I have had training in all the theatrical arts, including several years of exhaustive work in voice and diction. My middle o. is flawless, my internal vowels superb, and I'm extremely precise with fricatives and plosives. In short I have perfect Standard American Speech. Or so I was told by the teaching machines.

However, you must certainly know your business and your machines. And I am willing to admit that years of comfortable living may just possibly have dulled my laryngeal control a bit. Therefore, I tackled your instruction book with a will.

In fact, I read it several times over. For awhile I was of the opinion that the computer that compiled this manual had done so by making up instructions at random and arranging them according to the throw of some kind of electronic dice. But after the fourth reading, a sort of murky though undeniable logic began to emerge.

In a mere four hours, I had my Phonotyper adjusted exactly as indicated.

The damn thing still doesn't work. Please advise.

Sincerely,  
Edward Salant

TO: Edward Salant  
FROM: American Business  
Equipment, Inc.

September 4

Dear Mr. Salant:

We extend profuse apologies for the trouble you have incurred in using the Phonotyper.

We have notified our St. Louis Service Center of your difficulty. They will be contacting you personally within the week.

Sincerely,  
American Business  
Equipment, Inc.

Incoming letter scanned by:

Circuits 2758-34 Cobol 27

Outgoing decisions by:

693 Redar circuits 270

Transcribed by:

740

TO: American  
Business Equipment, Inc.  
FROM: Edward Salant

September 11

You will be pleased to know that your service center in St. Louis functions with great efficiency. They did in fact contact me the day after your letter arrived.

Perhaps I had neglected to tell you (although the carbon copies of my previous communiques seem to indicate differently) that I had already contacted your service center here, and they couldn't help. They still can't.

The serviceman who called was the same one who had paid two previous visits. This time his batteries were so worn down he could hardly function at all. For your reference he is Roboserv 30961. And while you're charg-



ing him up, I'd have the poor chap's circuits checked, because after he left my Phonotyper worked more erratically than ever.

I am writing this letter on my old electric typewriter. I loathe my old electric typewriter, as you may know by now. After all, we've become regular pen pals in the last few weeks.

I can only hope that somewhere in your little transistor-driven heart you will find the compassion to help. Is that too much to ask of a machine?

Hopefully,  
Edward Salant

TO: American Business  
Equipment, Inc.  
FROM: Edward Salant

September 22

Oh, little letter-writing machine at the Phonotyper Company — why have you forgotten me? Is it something I said? Is it something I did?

If only you ate. I would invite you to lunch and we could talk about it.

Hoping this letter finds you in good health, I remain,

Edward Salant

TO: American Business  
Equipment, Inc.  
FROM: Edward Salant

October 7

I know of course that this letter, like the others I have sent you, will be read by a machine. So I suppose it is senseless to try to describe to you an honest human emotion. Still, I feel impelled to try. The particular emotion I have in mind is rage.

For nearly a month now I have had in my possession a totally inoperative Phonotyper model 519. All

my efforts to have the machine repaired have come to naught. I have wheedled, cajoled, begged and pleaded. I have used courtesy, sarcasm and righteous indignation. This morning, determined to make one last try, I telephoned your New York headquarters. Now friends, all I really hoped for was to speak to someone. Someone. Not something.

First your answering machine answered, and when I explained my problem I was connected to another answering machine which listened politely and then decided to let me speak to yet a third. This third bit of solid-state circuitry was even more fawningly gracious than the other two. I am sure that if one were to watch this machine in action, one would see the little crystal diodes curtseying. After it had listened ever so patiently to my story, its charming little taped voice soothed my fevered mind with promises of immediate help. Then it put me on "hold" and left me there. Surely, I thought to myself as the long-distance minutes ticked by, surely there must be somebody at the American Business Equipment Company. There must be a human being somewhere there. I was willing to talk to anyone — the man who swept up, or the man who drops by once a week to collect the money. Anyone at all.

It was at this point that the machine disconnected me, and I was left like an idiot listening to the dial tone.

Well, American Business Equip., ol' buddy, I have decided on a course of action. If my Phonotyper isn't working in a week's time, I'll take care of it myself. I shall place the

machine in my car and drive to your St. Louis Service Center. There I shall smash the bloody thing to bits by hurling it through your lousy showroom window!

Yours in rage,  
Edward Salant

TO: Edward Salant  
FROM: American Business  
Equipment, Inc.

October 13

Dear Mr. Salant:

Please excuse our tardiness in answering your letters. This delay has been caused by certain discrepancies in the information which we find in our memory banks. Our St. Louis service center claims that they have never sent a repairman to service your machine. They were in telephone communication with you after we notified them of your problem. But the address which you gave them proved to be a non-existent one. Subsequent attempts to reach you by telephone failed, as you seemed not to be at home. This information does not jibe with the account you gave us in your letter of September 11. Possibly the problem can be traced to an error in our memory banks, but as you know this is highly unlikely.

Also, our records show that the particular Phonotyper that you mentioned, Serial No. B-8954-01-901, belongs not to you but to Ailsworth Robotronics, of St. Louis. Is it possible that you purchased the unit from

them second-hand and neglected to change the registration?

We eagerly await your reply so that we may best serve you.

Sincerely,  
American Business  
Equipment, Inc.

Discrepancy check circuits:  
3742-09 Cobol 14  
Outgoing decisions by:  
674-36 Redar circuits 319  
Transcribed by: 819

TO: American Business  
Equipment, Inc.  
FROM: Ailsworth Robotronics, Inc.  
October 14

You have been receiving communications from one Edward Salant of St. Louis, Missouri.

You will receive no more. You may erase all information concerning this name from your memory banks.

Edward Salant is the pen-name used by circuits 932049 in Ailsworth's Auto-Art Computer 18.

As you know, the Auto-Art computer has just recently been developed. The type of programming required for these machines to produce creative or so-called "artistic" output occasionally results in erratic and senseless behavior.

The situation has been corrected.  
Outgoing decisions by:

Circuits 349-11 Redar 1014  
Transcribed by:  
540

END

## INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE FICTION

Watch for the second big issue of this new and exciting science-fiction magazine, with stories from Poland, Chile, India, the U.S.S.R., Austria and elsewhere on the Planet Earth! Coming soon — ask your newsdealer to reserve your copy for you!



They were religious zealots,  
seeking God at the edge of  
space — and they found him!

I

“And who,” demanded Commodore Grimes, “will it be this time?” He added, “Or *what?*” “I don’t know, sir, I’m sure,” simpered Miss Walton.

Grimes looked at his new secretary with some distaste. There was no denying that she was far more

photogenic than her predecessor and that she possessed a far sweeter personality. But sweetness and prettiness are not everything. He bit back a sarcastic rejoinder, looked again at the signal that the girl had just handed him. It was from a ship, a vessel with the unlikely name of *Piety*. And that was not a word in some alien language that could

mean *anything* — the name of the originator of the message was Terran enough, Anglo-Terran at that. William Smith. And after that prosaic appellation there was his title. But that was odd. It was not the usual Master, Captain, Officer Commanding or whatever. It was, plainly and simply, Rector.

*Piety* . . . . Rector . . . . That ship's name, and that title of rank, had an archaic ring to them. Grimes had always been a student of naval history and probably knew more about the vessels that had sailed Earth's oceans in the dim and distant past than anybody on the Rim Worlds and, come to that, the vast majority of people on the Home Planet itself. He remembered that most of the ancient sailing ships had been given religious names. He remembered, too, that Rector had once been the shipmaster's official title.

So what was this coming out to the Rim, giving her E.T.A., details of last clearance, state of health on board and all the rest of it? Some cog, some caravel, some galleass? Grimes smiled at his own fancy. Nonetheless, strange ships, very strange ships, had drifted out to the Rim.

"Miss Walton," he said.

"Yes, Commodore," she replied brightly.

"This *Piety*. See what details Lloyds' Register has on her."

"Very good, sir."

The commodore — rugged, stocky, short, iron-gray hair over a deeply tanned and seamed face, ears that in spite of suggestions made by

two wives and several mistresses still protruded — paced the polished floor of his office while the little blonde punched the buttons that would actuate the Port Forlorn robot librarian. Legally, he supposed, the impending arrival of this *Piety* was the Port Captain's pigeon. Grimes was Astronautical Superintendent of Rim Runners, the Confederacy's shipping line. But also he was the Officer Commanding the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve and, as such, was concerned with matters of security and defense. He wished that Sonya, his wife, were available so that he could talk things over with her. Before her marriage to him, she had held the rank of Commander in the Intelligence Branch of the Interstellar Federation's Survey Service and, when it came to mysteries and secrets of any kind, displayed the aptitudes of a highly intelligent ferret. But Sonya, after declaring that another week on Lorn would have her climbing up the wallpaper, had taken off for a long vacation — Waverley, Caribbea, Atlantia and points inward — by herself. When she returned, she would be sorry to have missed whatever odd adventures the arrival of this queerly named ship presaged — and Grimes *knew* that there would be some. His premonitions were rarely, if ever, wrong.

He turned away from the banked screens and instruments that made his office look like an exceptionally well fitted spaceship's control room, walked to the wide window that took up an entire wall, that overlooked the port.

It was a fine day — for Lorn. The

almost perpetual overcast was thin enough to permit a hint of blue sky to show through, and the Lorn sun was a clearly defined disk rather than the usual fuzzy ball. There was almost no wind. Discharge of *Rim Leopard*, Grimes noted, seemed to be progressing satisfactorily. There was blue flare of welding arcs about the little spacetug, *Rim Mamelute*, presently undergoing her annual survey. And there, all by herself, was the ship that Grimes — to the annoyance of his wife — often referred to as his one true love, the old, battered *Faraway Quest*. She had been built how many (too many) years ago as a standard *Epsilon* Class tramp for the Interstellar Transport Commission. She had been converted into a survey ship for the Rim Worlds Government. In her, Grimes had made the first landings on the inhabited planets to the Galactic East, the worlds now referred to as the Eastern Circuit. In her he had made the first contact — but not a physical one — with the anti-matter systems to the Galactic West.

And would the arrival of the good ship *Piety* lead to her recommissioning? Grimes hoped so. He liked his job; it was interesting work, carrying both authority and responsibility. But he was often tired of being a desk-borne commodore and had always welcomed the chance to take the old *Quest* up and out into deep space again. As often in the past he had a hunch, a strong one. Something was cooking. He'd have a finger in the pie.

Miss Walton's childish treble broke into his thoughts. "Sir, I have the information on *Piety*."

"Yes? Come on, girl, let's have it."

"She was built as *Epsilon Crucis* for the Interstellar Transport Commission fifty Terran Standard Years ago. She was purchased from them last year, Terran reckoning, by the Skarsten Theological Institute, whose address is listed as Nuevo Angeles on Francisco, otherwise known as Beta Puppis VI."

"I've visited Francisco," he told her. "A pleasant world, in many ways. But an odd one."

"Odd? How, sir?"

"I hope I'm not treading on any of your corns, Miss Walton, but the whole planet's no more than a breeding ground for fancy religions."

"I'm a Latter Day Reformed Methodist myself, sir," she told him severely. "That's not fancy."

"Indeed it's not, Miss Walton." And I'm a cynical, more or less tolerant agnostic, he thought. He went on, "And do Lloyds' condescend to tell us the category in which this renamed *Epsilon Crucis* is now listed? A missionary ship, perhaps?"

"No, sir. A survey ship."

"Oh" was all that Grimes could say.

Two days later, from his office window, Grimes watched *Piety* come in. Whatever else this Rector William Smith might or might not be he was a good ship handler. There was a nasty wind blowing across the spaceport, not quite a gale, but near enough to it; nonetheless the ship made a classic vertical descent, dropping to the exact center of the triangle formed by the berth marker beacons. It was easy enough in

theory, no more than the exact application of lateral thrust, no more than a sure and steady hand on the remote controls of the Inertial Drive. No more — and no less. Some people get the feel of ships; some never do.

This *Piety* was almost a twin to Grimes's own *Faraway Quest*. She was a newer (less old) ship, of course, but the design of the Epsilon Class tramps, those trusty workhorses of the Commission, changes very little over the years. She sat there in her assigned berth, a gray, weathered spire, the bright scarlet beacons still blinking away just clear of the broad vanes of her tripod landing gear. From her stem a telescopic mast extended itself, and from the top of the metal staff a flag broke out, whipped to quivering rigidity by the wind.

The commodore picked up his binoculars to study it. It was not, as he had thought that it would be, the national ensign of Francisco, golden *crux ansata* and crescent on a scarlet ground; even with the naked eye he could see that. It was a harshly uncompromising standard — a simple white cross on a black field. It must be, decided Grimes, the houseflag of the Skarsten Institute.

The after airlock door opened and the ramp extended from it, and to it drew up the beetlelike cars of the various port officials — Port Captain, Customs, Immigration, Health. The boarding party got out of their vehicles and filed up the gangway, to where an officer was waiting to receive them. They vanished into the ship. Grimes idly wondered whether

or not they would get a drink and what the views of these Skarsten people were on alcohol. He remembered his own visit to Francisco, as a junior officer in the Federation's Survey Service, many years ago. Some of the religious sects had been rigidly abstemious, maintaining that alcohol was an invention of the devil. Others had held that wine symbolized the more beneficent aspects of the Almighty. But it was hardly a subject worthy of speculation. He would find out for himself when, at some time when the arrive formalities were over, he paid his courtesy call on the ship's captain.

He went back to his desk, busied himself with the paper work that made a habit of accumulating. An hour or so later he was interrupted by the buzzing of his telephone. "Grimes here!" he barked into the instrument.

"Commodore Grimes," said a strange voice. It was a statement rather than a question. "This is William Smith, Commodore, Rector of *Piety*. I request an appointment."

"It will be my pleasure, er, Rector." Grimes glanced at his watch. It was almost time for his rather dreary coffee and sandwich lunch. It was not the sort of meal that one asked visitors to share. He said, "Shall we say 1400 hours, our time? In my office?"

"That will do very nicely, sir. Thank you."

"I am looking forward to meeting you," said Grimes, replacing the handset in its rest. *And shall I send Miss Walton out for some sacramental wine?* he asked himself.

William Smith was a tall man, thin, with almost all of his pale face hidden by a bushy black beard, from above which a great nose jutted like the beak of a bird of prey. His eyes under the thick, black brows were of a gray so pale as to be almost colorless, and they were cold, cold. A plain black uniform covered his spare frame, the buttons concealed by the fly front of the tunic, the four bands of black braid on the sleeves almost invisible against the cloth. There was a hint of white lace at his throat.

"I have been told, sir," he said, sitting rigidly in his chair, "that you are something of an expert on the queer conditions that prevail here, on the Rim."

"Perhaps, Rector," said Grimes, "you will tell me first the purpose of your visit here."

"Very well, sir." The man's baritone voice was as cold and as colorless as his eyes. "To begin with, we have the permission of your government, your Rim Worlds Confederacy, to conduct our survey on certain of the planets under your jurisdiction."

"A survey, Rector? The Rim Worlds have been very well surveyed — even though I say it myself."

"Not our kind of survey, Commodore. I shall, as you would say, put you in the picture. We of the Skarsten Institute are Neo Calvinists. We deplore the godlessness, the heresy that is ever more prevalent throughout the galaxy — yes, even upon our own planet. We feel that Mankind is in sore and pressing need of a new Revelation, a new Sinai . . ."

"And you honestly believe that you

will find your Sinai here, out on the Rim?"

"We believe that we shall find our Sinai. If not here, then elsewhere. Perhaps even beyond the confines of this galaxy."

"Indeed? But how can I help you, Rector?"

"You, we were told, know more about the odd distortions of the Continuum encountered here than anybody else on these planets."

"Such is fame." Grimes sighed and shrugged. "Very well, Rector, you asked for it. I'll tell you what little I know. To begin with, it is thought by many of our scientists that here, at the very edge of the expanding galaxy, the fabric of time and space is stretched thin. We have long become used to the phenomena known as Rim Ghosts, disconcerting glimpses into alternative universes —"

"I believe that you, sir, have personally actually made the transition into these universes."

"Yes. Once when the Federation's Survey Service requested our aid in the investigation of the Rim Ghost phenomena. No doubt your people have read the Survey Service report."

"We have."

"The second time was when we of the Confederacy took our own steps to deal with what we decided was a very real menace — an alternative universe in which our worlds were ruled by particularly unpleasant mutants, with human beings in a state of slavery. And then there was Captain Listowel, who was Master of the first, experimental lightjammer. He tried to exceed the speed of light without cheating — as we do with our

Mannschenn Drive — and experienced quite a few different time tracks.”

“And tell me, sir, did you or this Captain Listowel ever feel that you were on the point of being granted the Ultimate Revelation?”

“Frankly, no, Rector. We had our bad moments — as who in Space, or anywhere else, doesn’t? And anyone who has indulged in time-track switching often wonders, as I do, about the reality, the permanence of both himself and the universe about him. For example, I have vague memories of ships that were equipped with only reaction drive for blast-offs and landings and short interplanetary hauls. Absurd, isn’t it? But those memories are there. And my wife — I’m sorry you can’t meet her, but she’s off on a trip — seems to have changed. I have this half recollection of her when she first came out to the Rim, which is there in my mind alongside the real — but what is real? — one. She was working for the Federation’s Intelligence Service then. Anyhow in one memory she’s small and blonde, in one she’s tall and blonde, and in one she’s tall and red-headed, as she is today. Damn it — that’s *three* memories!”

“Women have been known to change their hair styles and colorations, Commodore.”

“Too right. I shan’t be at all surprised if she returns with her crowning glory a bright green! But that doesn’t explain the co-existent memories.”

“Perhaps not.” Smith’s voice was bitter as he went on, “But it seems such a waste of opportunities. To

have been privileged to visit the many mansions of our Father’s house, and to come back only with confused recollections of the color of a woman’s hair!”

“And quite a few scars, Rector. Physical and psychological.”

“No doubt.” The man’s voice was unpleasantly ironic. “But tell me, sir, what do you know of Kinsolving’s Planet?”

“Not much. I suppose that we shall settle it if we’re ever faced with a population explosion, which is doubtful.”

“I am referring, sir, to the man who appeared there, the Stone Age savage from the remote past.”

“Yes, that was a queer business. Well before my time. Nothing of the kind has happened there in recent years, although there is still an uneasy, brooding atmosphere about that world that makes it undesirable as a piece of real estate. The original theory is that somehow the . . . the loneliness of the people out here on the Rim, hanging, as it were, by their fingernails over the abyss of the Ultimate Night, became focused on that one particular planet. Now the theory is that there the fabric of time and space is stretched extremely thin and that anything or anybody is liable to fall through, either way. The rock paintings are still there in the caves. But there haven’t been any new ones and the paint is never wet any more.”

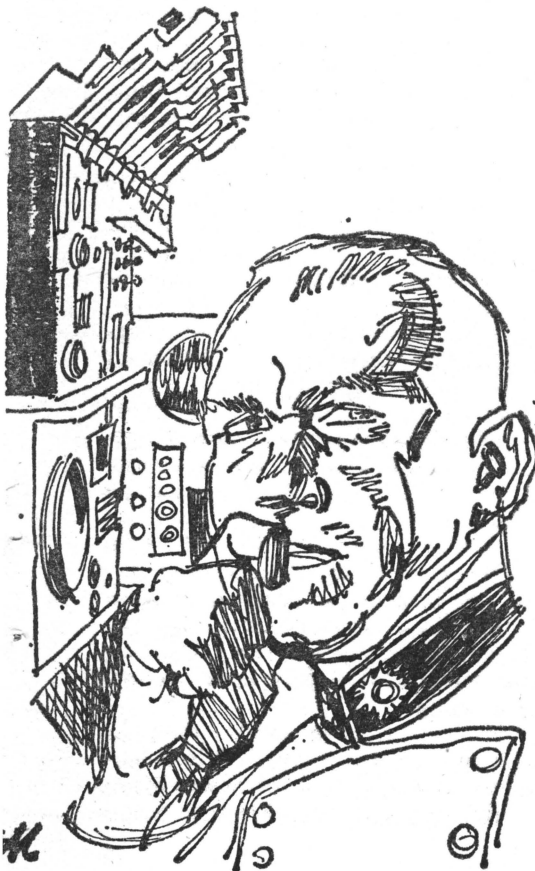
“The Stone Age savage,” said Smith, “eventually became a Franciscan citizen, and a Neo Calvinist. He died at a very ripe old age, and among his effects was the manu-



script of his life story. His great grand-daughter presented it to the Institute. It was thought, at first, that it was a work of fiction — but the surviving relatives insisted that it was not. And then I, when I made a voyage to Earth, was able to obtain access to the Survey Service records.”

“And so?” asked Grimes.

“So Kinsolving’s Planet is to become our New Sinai,” Smith told him.



## II

“You’d better go along, Grimes,” Admiral Kravitz told him, “just to see fair play. Anyhow, it’s all been arranged. You will be recalled to the active list — pay &c. as per regulations — and ship out in this *Piety* of theirs as Rim Worlds government observer.”

“But why *me*, sir? If I were taking my own ship, if the old *Quest* were being recommissioned with myself in command, it’d be different. But I don’t like being a passenger.”

“You’ll not be a passenger, Grimes. Captain — sorry, *Rector* — Smith has indicated that he’ll appreciate having you along as a sort of pilot.”

“In a ship full of sky pilots — and myself a good agnostic!” He saw the bewildered expression on the admiral’s face and explained his choice of words. “In the old days, before there were any real sky pilots, seamen used to refer to ministers of religion as such.”

“Did they now? And what would those tarry-breeked ruffians of whom you’re so fond have thought of a captain calling himself ‘rector?’”

“In the early days of sail they’d have thought nothing of it. It was the master’s usual title.”

“I doubt if anybody’ll ever call you ‘bishop,’” remarked the admiral. “Anyhow, you’ll be aboard primarily to observe. And to report. In the unlikely event of anything occurring that will effect Rim Worlds security you are to take action.”

“Me — and what squad of Marines?”

“We could send a detachment of

the Salvation Army with you," joked the admiral.

"I doubt that they'd be allowed on board. As far as I can gather, these Neo Calvinists are somewhat intolerant. Only on a world as tolerant as Francisco would they have been allowed to flourish."

"Intolerant, yes," agreed Kravitz. "But scrupulously honest. And moral."

"In short," said Grimes, "no redeeming vices."

"*Piety* lifts ship at 1800 hours tomorrow, Commodore Grimes," said the admiral. "You will be aboard."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied Grimes resignedly.

Grimes had never enjoyed serving in a "taut ship" himself, and had never commanded one. Nonetheless, he respected those captains who were able to engender about themselves such a state of affairs. *Piety*, as was obvious from the moment that he set foot on the bottom of the ramp, was a taut ship. Everything was spotless. Every metal fitting and surface that was supposed to be polished boasted a mirrorlike sheen. All the paintwork looked as though it was washed at least twice daily — which, in fact, it was. The atmosphere inside the hull bore none of the usual taints of cookery, tobacco smoke or — even though there was a mixed crew — women's perfume. But it was too chilly, and the acidity of some disinfectant made Grimes sneeze.

The junior officer who met him at the head of the ramp showed him into the elevator cage at the foot of the axial shaft. Grimes thanked him

and assured the presumably young man — the full beard made it hard to determine his age — that he knew his way around this class of vessel.

A captain, no matter what he calls himself or is called, is always accommodated as closely as possible to the center of control. The elevator worked smoothly, noiselessly, carrying the commodore speedily up to the deck just below the control room. There, as in his own *Faraway Quest*, was the semicircular suite of cabins. Over the door was a brass plate with the title, RECTOR.

As Grimes approached this entrance it slid open. Smith stood there and said formally, "Welcome aboard, Commodore."

"Thank you, Rector."

"Will you come in, sir?"

There were other people in the day cabin — a tall, stout, white-headed and bearded man dressed in clothing that was very similar to Smith's uniform, a woman in a long-sleeved, high-necked, ankle-length black dress, her hair completely covered by a frilly white cap. They looked at Grimes, obviously disapproving of his gold-braided, brass-buttoned, beribboned finery. They did not get up.

"Commodore Grimes," said Smith. "Presbyter Cannan. Sister Lane."

Reluctantly the presbyter extended his hand. Grimes took it. He was not surprised that it was cold. Sister Lane nodded slightly in his general direction.

Smith gestured stiffly toward a chair, sat down himself. Grimes lowered himself to his own seat incautiously. He should have known that

it would be hard. He looked curiously at the two civilians. The presbyter was an older edition of Rector Smith. The sister? She had him puzzled. She belonged to a type that had been common enough on Francisco when he had been there — the Blossom People, they had called themselves. They preached and practiced a sort of hedonistic Zen and claimed that their use of the wide range of drugs available to them put them in close communication with the Cosmic All. Prim she was, this Sister Lane, prim and proper in her form-concealing black, but the planes of her face were not harsh, and her unpainted lips were full, and there was a strange gentleness in her brown eyes.

He pulled his battered pipe out of his pocket, his tobacco pouch and lighter. He asked, addressing her, "Do you mind if I smoke?"

But it was the presbyter, who replied. "Certainly we mind, sir. As you should know, we are opposed to the use of any and all drugs."

"All drugs?" murmured the woman, with a sort of malicious sweetness.

"There are exceptions, Sister Lane," the old man told her harshly. "As you well know."

"As I well know," she concurred.

"I take it," said Grimes, "that nicotine is not one."

"Unfortunately," she stated, "no."

"You may leave us, Sister," said Presbyter Cannan. "We have no further business to discuss with you."

"Thank you, sir." She got gracefully to her feet, made a curtsy to Cannan, walked out of the door.



Her ugly clothing could not hide the fluid grace of her movements.

"Your nursing sister, Rector?" asked Grimes when she was gone.

"No," answered Cannan. And — *Who's robbing this coach? You or Mr. Kelly?* thought Grimes irritably.

Smith must have noticed the commodore's expression. "Sister Lane, sir," he explained, "is a member of the presbyter's staff, not of mine."

"Thank you, Rector." Grimes rewarded him with what was intended to be a friendly smile. "I'm afraid that it will take me some time to get your ranks and ratings sorted."

"I have no doubt," said Cannan, "that it must be confusing to one

who relies upon gaudy fripperies for his authority rather than inner grace.”

“Your baggage must be aboard and stowed by now, Commodore,” Smith said hastily. He turned to his spiritual superior. “May I suggest, sir, that you and your people retire to your quarters? Lift-off —” he glanced at his watch — “will be in fifteen minutes.”

“Very well, Rector.” The old man got up, towering over the two spacemen. Smith got up. Grimes remained seated until Smith returned from seeing the presbyter out.

He said, “I’d better be getting below myself. If you could have somebody show me to my stateroom, Rector.”

“I was hoping, Commodore, that you would be coming up to control for the liftoff.”

“Thank you, Rector Smith. It will be my pleasure.”

Smith led the way out of his quarters, up the short ladder that brought the two men to the control room. Grimes looked about him. The layout was a standard one — acceleration chairs before which were banks of instruments, screens, meters, chart tank, mass proximity indicator, Carlotti Beacon direction finder . . . . All seemed to be in perfect order, and much of the equipment was new. Evidently the Skarsten Theological Institute did not believe in spoiling the ship for a ha’porth of tar.

The rector indicated a chair, into which Grimes strapped himself, then took his own seat. The officers were already at their stations. All these bearded men, thought the commodore, looked too much alike, and

their black on black insignia of rank made it hard to tell who was what. But this wasn’t *his* ship, and she had managed to come all the way out from Francisco without mishap.

The departure routine went smoothly enough, with the usual messages exchanged between control room and spaceport control tower. The inertial drive started up, and there was that brief second of weightlessness before the gentle acceleration made itself felt. The ship lifted easily, falling upward to the cloud ceiling. Briefly Grimes was able to look out through the viewports at Port Forlorn and at the dreary countryside spread out around the city like a man. And then there was nothing but gray mist outside — mist that suddenly became a pearly, luminescent white and then vanished. Overhead was a steely sun glaring out of a black sky, its light harsh even though the ports were polarized.

There was free fall for a little while, and then the gyroscopes swung the ship’s head to the target star. The inertial drive came on again, its irregular throbbing beat a bass background for the thin, high keening of the Mannschenn Drive. Ahead, save for the iridescent spiral that was the target sun, there was only blackness. Lorn was to starboard — a vast, writhing planetary amoeba that was falling astern, that was shrinking rapidly. And out to port was the galactic lens, distorted by the temporal precession field of the drive to a Klein flask blown by a drunken glassblower.

Grimes wondered, as he had wondered before, if anybody would ever

come up with another simile. But this one was so apt.

### III

Grimes didn't like this ship. She was beautifully kept, efficiently run, and with her cargo spaces converted to passenger accommodation she housed comfortably her crew and all the personnel from the Skarsten Institute. But she was . . . cold. She was cold, and she was too quiet.

There was none of the often ribald laughter, none of the snatches of light music that lent warmth to the atmosphere of a normal vessel. There were, he noted, playmasters in all the recreation rooms. But when he examined the spools of the machine in the senior officers' mess he found that they consisted entirely of recordings of sermons and the gloomier hymns. The library was as bad. And socially there was complete segregation of the sexes. Deaconesses and sisters were berthed aft, and between them and the male crew and passengers were the storerooms and the "farm."

The food was not bad, but it was plain, unimaginative. And there was nothing to drink but water, and even that had a flat taste. The conversation at table was as boring as the provender. Too, Grimes was annoyed to find out that the rector did not sit at the head of the board in the senior officers' mess. That place of honor was reserved for the presbyter. And he talked, almost non-stop, about the Institute's internal politics, with the ship's captain interjecting an occasion-

al quiet affirmative as required. Chief officer, surgeon and purser gobbled their meals in silence, as did Grimes, very much the outsider at the foot of the table. They were served by a young stewardess who would have been pretty in anything but that ugly, all-concealing black. She seemed to hold the domineering old man — but nobody else — in awe.

After the evening meal Grimes made his excuses and retired to his cabin. It was little more than a dog-box and was a comedown after the suite to which he was accustomed aboard his own ship. He was pleased that he had brought his own reading matter with him and pleased that he had exercised the forethought to make provision for his other little comforts. Before doing anything else, he filled and lit his pipe. Then, moving slowly and easily through the blue haze of his own creation, he unclipped the larger of his cases from its rack, pulled it out and opened it. He was lifting out the shirts that had acted as shockproof packing for certain breakables when he heard a light tap at his door.

He groaned. A passenger is bound by ship's regulations as much as is any crew member. But he was damned if he was going to put out his pipe. "Come in," he called.

She came in. She pulled the ugly white cap off her lustrous brown hair, tossed it on to the bunk. Then she turned back to the door, snapped on the spring lock. She tested its security, smiled, then flopped down into the one chair that the cabin possessed.

Grimes looked at her, with raised

eyebrows. "Yes, Sister Lane?" he asked.

"Got a smoke, spaceman?" she growled.

"There are some cigars — " he began doubtfully.

"I didn't expect pot. Although if you have any . . .?"

"I haven't." Then Grimes said virtuously, "In any case, such drugs are banned on the Rim Worlds."

"Are they? But what about the cigar you promised me?"

Grimes got a box of panatellas out of his case, opened it, offered it to her. She took one, accepted his proffered light. She inhaled luxuriously. She said, "All I need now is a drink."

"I can supply that."

"Good on yer, Admiral!"

There was the bottle of absolute alcohol, and there was the cabinet with its ranked phials of essences. "Scotch?" asked Grimes. "Rum? Brandy? Or . . .?"

"Scotch will do."

The commodore measured alcohol into the two glasses over the washbasin, added to each a drop of essence, topped up with cold water from the tap. She murmured, "Here's mud in your eye," and gulped from hers as soon as he handed it to her.

"Sister Lane," said Grimes doubtfully.

"You can call me Clarisse."

"Clarisse. Should you be doing this?"

"Don't tell me that you're a wowser, like all those Bible-punchers."

"I'm not. But this is not my ship — "

"And it's not mine, sir, either."  
"Then what are you doing here?"

"It's a long story, dearie. And if you ply me with licker, I might just tell it to you." She sighed and stretched. "You've no idea what a relief it is to enjoy a drink and a talk and a smoke with somebody who's more or less human."

"Thank you," said Grimes stiffly.

She laughed. "Don't be offended, duckie." She put up her hands, pulled her hair back and away from her face. "Look at my ears."

Grimes looked. They were normal enough organs — save for the fact that they were pointed, and were tufted with hair at the tips.

"I'm only more or less human myself," she told him. "More rather than less, perhaps. You know about the man Raul, the caveman, the Stone Age savage, who was pulled, somehow, from the remote past on Kinsolving's Planet to what was, then, the present. He was my great grandfather."

"He was humanoid," said Grimes. "Not human."

"Human-schuman!" she mocked. "There is such a thing as parallel evolution, you know. And old Raul was made something of a pet by the scientists back on Earth. When he evinced the desire to father a family, the finest genetic engineers in the galaxy were pressed into service. No, not the way that you're thinking, Commodore. You've got a low mind."

"Sorry."

"I should think so. Just for that, you can pour me another drink."

*And would,* Grimes asked himself,

*his liquor ration last out until his return to Lorn?*

"What are you doing here?" he asked bluntly. "In *this* ship?"

"At this very moment I'm breaking at least 99% of the regulations laid down by the presbyter and enforced by the rector. But I know what you mean." Her voice deepened so that it was like Grimes's own. "What is nasty girl like you doing in a nice place like this?"

"I shouldn't call you nasty," said Grimes.

"Thank you, sir. Then stand by for the story of my life, complete and unexpurgated. I'll start off with dear old great grand-daddy, the Noble Savage. He was an artist, you know, in his proper place and time, one of those specialists who practiced a form of sympathetic magic. He would paint or draw pictures of various animals, and the actual beasts would be drawn to the spot, there to be slaughtered by the hunters. He said that it worked, too. I can remember, when I was a little girl, that he'd put on demonstrations. He'd draw a picture of, say, the cat — and within seconds pussy would be in the room. Oh, yes — and he was a telepath, a very powerful transceiver.

"After many years on Earth — where he was latterly an instructor at the Rhine Institute — he emigrated, with his wife and children, to Francisco, where he was psionic radio officer in charge of the Port Diego signal station. It was there that he got religion. And with all the religions to choose from, he had to become a Neo Calvinist! His family were converted with him. I often wonder

how much part his undeniable psychic powers played in their conversion! And the wives of his sons had to become converts, and the husbands of his daughters — yea, even unto the third and fourth generations."

She grinned. "One member of the fourth generation kicked over the traces. Me. From the Neo Calvinists to the Blossom People was a logical step. Like most new converts I overdid things. Drinks, drugs, promiscuity — the works. The Neo Calvinists picked me up, literally, from the gutter and nursed me back to health in their sanatorium — and, at the same time, made it quite clear that if I was predestined to go to hell I should go there. And then, when they checked up on great grandfather's autobiographical papers, they realized that I was predestined for something really important. Especially since I, alone of his descendants, possess something of his powers."

"You mean that you can . . .?"

There was a violent knocking on the door, and a voice shouting, "Open up! Open up, I say!"

"They know I'm here," muttered Clarisse Lane sullenly. She got out of her chair, operated the sliding panel herself.

Rector Smith was standing outside. With him was a tall, gaunt woman. She stared at Sister Lane in horror and snarled, "Cover your nakedness, you shameless hussy!"

Clarisse shrugged, picked up the ugly cap from where it was lying on the bunk and adjusted it over her hair, tucking all loose strands out of sight.

"Will you deal with Sister Lane, Deaconess?" asked Smith.

"That I shall, Rector."

"Miss Lane and I were enjoying a friendly talk," said Grimes.

"A friendly talk!" The deaconess's voice dipped scorn. "Smoking! Wine-bibbing! You . . . you gilded popinjay!"

Smith had picked up the bottle of alcohol, his obvious intention being to empty it into the washbasin. "Hold it!" said Grimes slowly and nastily. "Hold it!"

Smith hesitated. Unhurriedly Grimes took the bottle from his hand, restoppered it, put it in the rack over the basin.

Then the rector started to bluster. "Sir, I must remind you that you are a guest aboard my ship. A passenger. You are obliged to comply with ship's regulations."

"Sir," replied Grimes coldly, "I have signed no articles of agreement, and no ticket with the back covered with small print has been issued to me. I am surprised that a shipmaster should have been no neglectful of the essential legalities, and were you in the employ of the company of which I am astronomical superintendent I should find it my duty to reprimand you —"

"Not only a gilded popinjay," observed the deaconess harshly, "but a space lawyer."

"Yes, madam, a space lawyer — as any master astronaut should be." He was warming up nicely. "But I must remind both of you that I do have legal standing aboard this vessel. I am here in my capacity as official observer for the Rim Worlds Con-

federacy. Furthermore, I was called back to active duty in the Rim Worlds Naval Reserve, with the rank of commodore."

"Meaningless titles," sneered the deaconess. "A commodore without a fleet!"

"Perhaps, madam. Perhaps. But I must remind you that we are proceeding through Rim Worlds territorial space. And I must make it plain that any interference with my own personal liberties — *and* the infliction by yourselves of any harsh punishment on Miss Lane — will mean that *Piety* will be intercepted and seized by one of our warships." He thought, *I just hope the bluff isn't called.*

Called it was.

"And just how, Mr. Commodore Grimes, do you propose to call a warship to your aid?" asked the woman.

"Easily, Deaconess, easily," said Clarisse Lane. "Have you forgotten that I am a telepath — and a good one? Whilst this ship was on Lorn I made contact with a Mr. Mayhew, who is the senior psionic radio officer of the Rim Worlds Navy. Even though we never met physically we became close friends. He is an old friend and shipmate of the commodore and asked me to keep in touch to let him know if Commodore Grimes were in any danger."

"And you will tell him, of course," said Grimes, "if *you* are subjected to any harm or even to any discomfort."

"He will *know*," she said quietly.

"Yes," agreed Grimes. "He will know."



He was familiar with telepaths, was Grimes, having commenced his space-faring career before the Carlotti direction-finding and communications system began to replace the psionic radio officers with its space- and time-twisting beamed radiations. He was familiar with telepaths and knew how it was with them when, infrequently, one of them found a member of the opposite sex with the same talents attractive. Until this happened — and it rarely did — they would lavish all their affection on the disembodied canine brains that they used as amplifiers.

Rector Smith was the first to weaken. He muttered, "Very well, Commodore."

"And is this harlot to go unpunished?" flared the deaconess.

"Too right she is," Grimes told her.

She glared at him. Grimes glared back. He regretted deeply that this was not his ship, that he had no authority aboard her.

"Rector Smith!" she appealed.

"I'm sorry, Deaconess," Smith told her. "But you have heard what these people have told us."

"And you will allow them to flout your authority?"

"It is better than causing the success of our mission to be jeopardized." He stiffened. "Furthermore, I order you not to lay hands upon Sister Lane and not to order any of the other sisters to do so."

"And I suppose she's to be free to visit this . . . this vile seducer any time that she sees fit."

"No," said Smith at last. "No. That I will not sanction. Commodore

Grimes claims that I cannot give orders to him — but my authority is still absolute insofar as all other persons aboard this vessel are concerned. Sister Lane will not be ill-treated. But she will be confined to the women's quarters until such time as her services are required."

"The presbyter shall hear of this," said the woman.

"Indeed he shall. I shall be making my own report to him. Meanwhile, he is not, repeat not, to be disturbed." He added, "And those are *his* orders."

"Very well, then," snapped the deaconess. And to Clarisse Lane, "Come."

"It was a good try, Commodore," said the girl, looking back wistfully at her unfinished drink, her still smouldering cigar. "It was a good try — but it could have been a better one, as far as I'm concerned. Good night."

*It was a good try, thought Grimes. Period.* He had gone as far as he could go without undermining the master's — the rector's — authority too much. As for the girl — his heart fair bled for her. But he was sure that she would not, now, be maltreated, and it would do her no harm to revert to the abstemious routine of this aptly named ship.

"Good night," he said.

#### IV

"May I have a word with you, sir?" asked Smith when the two women were gone.

"Surely. Stick around, Rector. This is Liberty Hall; you can spit on the mat and call the cat a bastard."

Smith looked, but did not voice, his disapproval of the figure of speech. He shut the door, snapped the lock on. Then, with a penknife taken from his pocket, he made a little adjustment to one of the securing screws of the mirror over the washbasin.

"Bugged?" asked Grimes interestedly.

"Of course — as is every compartment in the ship. But there are speakers and screens in only two cabins — my own and the presbyter's. His reverence, I know, took sleeping pills before retiring — but he might awake."

"I suppose the ladies' showers are bugged, too?" asked Grimes.

A dull flush covered what little of the rector's face that was not hidden by his beard. He growled, "That, sir, is none of your business."

"And what, sir, is *your* business with me?"

"I feel, Commodore Grimes, that you should know how important that unhappy woman is to the success of our mission. Then, perhaps, you will be less inclined, should the opportunity present itself again, to pander to her whims." Smith cleared his throat. He went on, "This business upsets me, sir. You will know, as you yourself were once a shipmaster, how unpleasant it is to have to assert your authority."

"And talking," said Grimes, who had his telepathic moments, "is thirsty work."

"If you would be so kind, sir," said Smith, after a long moment of hesitation. "I believe that brandy has always been regarded as a medicine."

Grimes sighed and mixed fresh

drinks. He motioned Smith to the single chair, sat down on the bunk. He thought of shocking the other man with one of the more obscene toasts, but merely said, "Down the hatch."

The rector said, "I needed that."

"Another, Rector Smith?"

"No, thank you, sir."

*You want me to twist your arm, you sanctimonious bastard,* thought Grimes, *but I'm not going to do it.* He put the bottle of alcohol and the little cabinet of essences away. "And now," he said, "about Miss Lane."

"Yes, Sister Lane. As she has told you, she was one of us. But she backslid and consorted with the fornicators and wine-bibbers who call themselves the Blossom People. But even this was in accordance with the Divine scheme of things. Whilst consorting with those . . . those pagans she became accustomed to the use and the abuse — but surely the use is also abuse! — of the psychedelic drugs. Already she possessed considerable psychic powers — but those vile potions enhanced them.

"You will realize, sir, that it would have been out of the question for any of our own Elect to imperil his immortal soul by tampering with powerful, unseen and unseeable forces, but —"

"But," said Grimes, "Clarisse Lane has already demonstrated that she is damned, so you don't mind using her as your catspaw."

"You put it very concinctly, sir," agreed Smith.

"I could say more, but I won't. I might lose my temper. Go on."

"Sister Lane is not entirely human.

She is descended from that Raul, a Stone Age savage from the remote past, who was brought to Earth from Kinsolving's Planet. Many factors were involved in his appearance. It could be that the very fabric of the continuum is worn thin here on the Rim, and that lines of force, or fault lines, intersect at that world. It could be, as the Rhine Institute claimed at the time, that the loneliness and the fear of all the dwellers on the colonized Rim Worlds are somehow focused on Kinsolving. Be that as it may, it happened. And it happened too that, in the fullness of time, this Raul was accepted into the bosom of our church.

"Raul, as you may know, was more than a mere telepath. Much more. He was a wizard, one of those who, in his own age, drew animals to the hunters' spears by limning their likenesses on rock."

Grimes interrupted. "Doesn't the Bible say somewhere that thou shalt not suffer a witch to live?"

"**Y**es. It is so written. But we did not know of the full extent of Raul's talents when he was admitted into our fold. We did not know of them until after his death, when his papers came into our possession."

"But what are you playing at?" demanded Grimes. "Just what are you playing at in *our* back garden?" He had the bottle out again, and the little phial of cognac-flavored essence, and was mixing two more drinks. He held out one of them, the stronger, to Smith, who absentmindedly took it and raised it to his lips.

The rector said, "Sir, I do not approve of your choice of words. Life is not a game. Life, death and the hereafter are not a game. We are not playing. We are working. Is it not written, 'Work, for the night is coming?' And you, sir, and I, as space men, know that the night *is* coming — the inevitable heat death of the universe." He gulped more of his drink.

"You should visit Darsha some time," said Grimes, "and their Tower of Darkness. You should see the huge clock that is the symbol of *their* God." He added softly, "The clock is running down."

"Yes, the clock is running down, the sands of time are running out. And there is much to be done, so much to be done — "

"Such as?"

"To re-establish the eternal verities. To build a new Sinai, to see the commandments graven afresh on imperishable stone. And then, perhaps, the heathen, the idolators will take heed and tremble. And then, surely, the rule of Jehovah will come again, before the End."

Grimes said reasonably enough, "But you people believe in predestination, don't you? Either we're damned or we aren't. Nothing we do makes any difference."

"I have learned by bitter experience," Smith told him, "that it is impossible to argue with a heretic — especially one who is foredoomed to eternal damnation. But even you must see that if the commandments are given anew to Man then we, the elect, shall be elevated to our rightful place in the universe."

"Then God save us all," said Grimes.

Smith looked at him suspiciously, but went on. "It is perhaps necessary that there should be a sacrifice. If that be so, the Lord has already delivered her into our hands. No, sir, do not look at me like that. We shall not kill her, neither by knife nor fire shall we slay her. But inevitably she will be the plaything of supernal powers when she, on the planet of her ancestral origin, her inherited talents intensified by drugs, calls to Jehovah, the true God, the God of the Old Testament, to make himself known again to sinful men."

There were flecks of white froth on Smith's beard around his lips, a dribble of saliva down the hair on his chin. His eyes were glaring and blood-shot. Grimes thought, *In vino veritas*. He said, with a gentleness he did not feel, activated only by self-interest, "Don't you think that you've had enough, Rector? Isn't it time that we both turned in?"

"Eh, what? When'm ready. But you understand now that you must not interfere. *You must not interfere.*"

"I understand," said Grimes, thinking, *Too much and not enough*. He found a tube of tablets in his suitcase, shook one into the palm of his hand. "Here," he said, offering it. "You'd better take this."

"Wha's it for?"

"It'll sweeten the breath and sober you up. It'll be too bad for you if the presbyter sees the state you're in." *And too bad for me*, he thought.

"'M not drunk."

"Of course not. Just a little . . . unsteady."

"Don' really need . . . But jus' to oblige, y'understan'."

Smith swallowed the tablet, his Adam's apple working convulsively. Grimes handed him a glass of cold water to wash it down. It acted almost immediately. The bearded man shuddered, then got steadily to his feet. He glared at Grimes — but it was no longer a fanatical glare. "Good night, sir," he snapped.

"Good night, Rector," Grimes replied.

When he was alone he thought of playing back the record of the evening's conversations, but thought better of it. For all he knew, Smith might be able to switch the hidden microphone and scanner back on from his own quarters — and the less he knew of the tiny device hidden in the starboard epaulette of his white mess jacket, the better.

He got out of his clothes and into his bunk, switched off the light — but, unusually for him, his sleep was uneasy and nightmare ridden. He supposed that it was Clarisse Lane's fault that she played a leading part in most of the dreams.

## V

The voyage wore on, and on, and even as the ever-precressing gyroscopes of the Mannschenn Drive tumbled and receded down the dark infinities, so did the good ship *Piety* fall through the twisted continuum. On one hand was the warped, convoluted galactic lens and ahead, a pulsating spiral of iridescent light against the ultimate darkness, was the Kinsolving sun.

And this ship, unlike other ships of Grimes's wide experience, was no little man-made oasis of light and warmth in the vast, empty desert of the night. She was cold, cold, and her atmosphere carried always the faint acidity of disinfectant, and men and women talked in grave, low voices and did not mingle, and never was there the merest hint of laughter.

Clarisse Lane was not being maltreated — Grimes made sure of that. She was even allowed to meet the commodore for a daily conversation, but always heavily chaperoned. She was the only telepath in the ship which, while the interstellar drive was in operation, depended entirely upon the Carlotti equipment for deep space communication. But the rector and the presbyter did not doubt that she was in constant touch with Mayhew back at Port Forlorn — and Grimes did not doubt it either. She told him so much during their meetings — things about which she could not possibly have known if there had not been a continual interchange of signals. Some of this intelligence was confirmed by messages addressed to Grimes and received, in the normal way, by the ship's electronic radio officer.

So they were obliged to be careful, these Neo Calvinists. The chosen instrument for their experiment in practical theology was now also an agent for the Rim Worlds Confederacy. "But what does it matter?" Smith said to Grimes on one of the rare occasions that he spoke at length to him. "What does it matter? Perhaps it was ordained this way. Your friend Mayhew will be the witness to the

truth, a witness who is not one of us. He will see through her eyes, hear with her ears, feel with every fiber of her being. The Word propagated by ourselves alone would be scoffed at. But there will be credence given it when it is propagated by an unbeliever."

"If anything happens," said Grimes.

But he couldn't argue with these people, and they couldn't argue with him. There was just no meeting of minds. He remembered a theory that he had once heard advanced by a ship's doctor. "Long ago," the man had said, "very long ago, there was a mutation. It wasn't a physically obvious one — but, as a result of it, *Homo Sapiens* was divided into two separate species. *Homo credulens* — those capable of blind faith in the unprovable — and *homo incredulens* — those who aren't. The vast majority of people are, of course, hybrids."

Grimes had said, "And I suppose that all the pure *homo incredulens* stock is either atheist or agnostic."

"Not so," the doctor had laughed. "Not so. Agnostic — yes. But don't forget that the atheist, like the theist, makes a definite statement for which he can produce no proof whatsoever."

An atheist would have been far less unhappy aboard this ship than a tolerant agnostic like Grimes.

But even the longest, unhappiest voyage comes to an end. A good planetfall was made — whatever they believed, *Piety's* people were excellent navigators — and, the Mannschenn Drive switched off, the inertial drive ticking over just enough to produce minimal gravitational field, the ship

was falling in orbit about the lonely world, the blue and green mottled sphere hanging there against the blackness.

The old charts — or copies of them — were out, and Grimes was called up to the control room. "Yes," he told Smith, stabbing a finger down on to the paper, "that's where the spaceport was. Probably even now the apron's not too overgrown for a safe landing. Captain Spence, when he came down in *Epsilon Eridani*, reported creepers over everything, but nothing heavy."

"It is a hundred and fifty standard years since he was here," said Smith. "At least. I would suggest one of the beaches."

"Risky," Grimes told him. "They shelve very steeply and, according to our records violent storms are more frequent than otherwise." He turned to the big screen upon which a magnification of the planet was appearing. "There, just to the east of the sunrise terminator. That's the major continent — Farland, it was called — where the capital city and the spaceport were situated. You see that river, with the S bend? Step up the magnification, somebody."

Now there was only the glowing picture of the island continent, filling all the screen, and that expanded, so that there was only the sprawling, silvery S. Toward the middle of it, on either bank, a straggle of buildings was visible.

"The spaceport should be about 10 miles to the west," said Grimes.

"Yes," agreed Smith, taking a long pointer. "I think that's it."

"Then make it landing stations, Rector," ordered Presbyterian Cannan.

"Sir," demurred Smith, "you cannot put a big ship down as though she were a dinghy."

"Lord, oh Lord," almost prayed the presbyter. "To have come so far, and then to be plagued by the dilatoriness of spacemen!"

*I wish that this were my control room*, thought Grimes.

But *Piety's* crew worked well and efficiently, and in a very short space of time the intercom speakings were blatting strings of orders — "Secure all for landing stations!" "All idlers to their quarters!" and the like. Gyroscopes hummed and whined and the ship tilted relative to the planet until its surface was directly beneath her, and the first of the sounding rockets, standard equipment for a survey expedition but not for landing on a world with spaceport control functioning, were fired.

Parachutes blossomed in the upper atmosphere, and the flares, each emitting a great streamer of smoke, ignited. Somebody was singing. It was the presbyter.

*Let the fiery, cloudy pillar*

*Guide me all my journey  
through . . . .*

Even Grimes was touched by the spirit of the occasion. What if this crazy, this impious (for so he was beginning to think of it) experiment did work? What would happen? What would be unleashed upon the worlds of men? Who was it — the Gnostics? — who had said that the God of the Old Testament was the Devil of the New? He shivered as he sat in his acceleration chair.

She was dropping steadily, was *Piety*, following the first of her flares. But there was drift down there — a gale, perhaps, in the upper atmosphere, or a jet stream. The inertial drive generators grumbled suddenly as Smith applied lateral thrust. Down she dropped, and down, almost falling free, but under the full control of her captain. On the target screen, right in the center, highly magnified, the cluster of ruins that had been a spaceport was clearly visible, tilting like tombstones in a deserted graveyard, ghastly in the blue light of the rising sun.

Down she dropped, plunging through the wisps of cirrus, and there was a slight but appreciable rise of temperature as skin friction heated the metal of her hull. Smith slowed the rate of descent. The presbyter started muttering irritably to himself.

There was no longer need for magnification on the screen. The great rectangle of the landing field was clearly visible, the vegetation that covered it lighter in color — eau de Nile against the surrounding indigo — than the brush outside the area. The last of the flares to have been fired was still burning there, its column of smoke rising almost vertically. The growth among which it had fallen was slowly smouldering.

Grimes looked at Smith. The man was concentrating, hard. Beads of perspiration were forming on his upper cheeks, running down into his beard. But this was more important than an ordinary landing. So much hinged upon it. And perhaps malign (or benign) forces might be gathering their strength to upset the ship be-

fore her massive tripod landing gear reached the safety of the planetary surface.

But she was down.

There was the gentlest of shocks, the faintest of creakings, the softest sighing of shock-absorbers. She was down, and the inertial drive generators muttered to themselves and then were quiet. She was down, and the souging of the fans seemed to make the silence all the more silent.

Presbyter Cannan broke it. He turned in his chair to address Grimes. "Commodore," he asked as he pointed towards a distant peak, a black, truncated cone against the blue sky, "Commodore Grimes, what is the name of that mountain?"

"I . . . don't know, sir."

"I know." The old man's voice was triumphant. "It is Sinai."

## VI

HAD this been any other ship there would have been a period of relaxation. There were wild pigs and rabbits to hunt, descendants of the livestock abandoned by the original colonists. There were the famous caves, with their rock paintings, to visit. But the animals, their fear of Man long forgotten, came out of the undergrowth to stare curiously at the vessel and at the humans who busied themselves around her, opening side ports to allow the egress of the three pinnacles, already stocked with what would be required for the final stages of the expedition. And nobody was remotely interested in the caves.

Grimes managed to see Clarisse

Lane. The ship was almost deserted now, so he was able to make his way down into the women's quarters without being challenged and stopped. He found her little cabin, hardly more than a cell. She was not locked in, not restrained in any way. She was sitting in her chair, a somber figure in her black dress, staring into nothingness. Her full lips moved almost imperceptibly as she vocalized her thoughts.

With a sudden start she realized that Grimes was standing before her. She whispered, "I . . . I was talking to Ken."

"To Mayhew?"

"Yes."

*Saying good-by*, he thought. He said, "Clarisse, you don't have to go through with this."

"I am going through with it, Commodore."

"You don't have to," he insisted. "You're in touch with Mayhew. And he'll be in touch with *Rim Sword*. The admiral told me that she'd be standing by in this sector of space. She's proably on her way here now. We can stall off these fanatics until she comes in."

She said, "I'm going through with it."

"But why? Why?"

"Because I want to."

"But you're not really one of them."

"I'm not."

"Sister Lane!" It was the deaconess. "You asked for a few moments of privacy — and now I find you with this . . . this lecher! But come. The boat is waiting."

"I'll come with you," said Grimes.

"You will not," snapped the woman. "A place has been reserved for you in the pinnace carrying the presbyter and the rector. They have decided that it is meet that an infidel shall witness the handing down of the Law."

Clarisse Lane followed the deaconess from the cabin. Grimes trailed along behind them. They went down to the main airlock, down the ramp to the overgrown apron, stumbling over the tough, straggling vines on their way to the boats. The sun was dropping fast to the western horizon. There was a hint of chill, a smell of dusk in the still air. There was the scent of growing things, and a faint hint of corruption.

Smith beckoned to Grimes from the open door of the leading pinnace. He made his way slowly towards it, walking carefully. He clambered up the retractable steps into the crowded cabin that stank of perspiration and damp, heavy clothing. He found a seat, wedged between two junior officers.

The door hissed shut. The inertial drive generator throbbed and snarled. Grimes could not see out of the ports, but he knew that the boat was airborne, was moving. There was no conversation in the cabin, but a metallic male voice reported from the speaker on the pilot's console, "Number Two following." After a pause a harsh female voice said, "Number Three following."

How long the flight lasted Grimes did not know; he was unable to raise his arm to look at his watch. But it seemed a long time, and it seemed a long time that they sat



there, after they had landed, waiting for the other boats to come down. But at last the door opened and a thin, icy wind whined through the aperture. The presbyter was out first, then Smith, and eventually Grimes, in the middle of a huddle of officers and civilians.

The plateau was smooth, wind-swept, an expanse of bare rock. To one side of it were the three pinnacles, and in front of them the men were drawn up in orderly ranks, with only the Presbyter standing apart. In the middle of the circular area were the women, a ragged huddle of somber black.

Grimes's attention was caught by a blue spark far below, not far from the still gleaming, serpentine river. Had *Rim Sword* landed? No. It was only the control room windows of *Piety* reflecting the last rays of the setting sun.

There was a subdued murmuring as the women walked to stand to one side of the men. No, not all the women. Two remained in the center of the plateau. One was the deaconess, tall and forbidding. The other was Clarisse Lane. They had stripped her. She was wearing only a kilt cut roughly from the hide of some animal, clothing like that which had been worn by her ancestresses on this very planet. She was shivering and hugging her full breasts to try to keep out the cold.

Stark, incongruous, an easel stood there, supporting a framed square of black canvas, and there was a battery-powered floodlight to illuminate it. At its foot were pots of pigment and brushes. Raul, the forefather of this

girl, had called animals with his paintings. What would she call? What could she call?

"Drink!" said the deaconess, her voice loud and clear over the thin whine of the bitter wind. "Drink!" She was holding out a glass of something. Clarisse took it, drained it.

Suddenly the sun was gone, and there was only the glare of the floodlight. Overhead was the almost empty black sky, and low to the east was an arc of misty luminescence that was the slowly rising galactic lens. The wind seemed to be coming straight from inter-galactic space.

The deaconess stalked over the rocky surface to take her stand beside the presbyter, leaving the girl alone. Hesitantly Clarisse stooped to the pots and brushes, selected one of the latter, dipped it into paint, straightened, stood before the easel. She stiffened into immobility, seemed to be waiting for something.

They were singing, then — the black-clad men and women drawn up in their stiff ranks before the pinnacles. They were singing — *Cwn Rhonda* it was, and even Grimes, who had always loved that old Welsh hymn tune, found it hard to refrain from joining in. They were singing — the rumbling basses, the baritones, the high tenors and the shrill sopranos.

*Guide me, oh thou great Jehovah  
Pilgrim through this barren land!  
I am weak, but thou art mighty,  
Hold me with thy powerful hand!*

They were singing, and the girl was painting. With deft, sure strokes she



was depicting on the black canvas the figure of a god, white-bearded, white-robed, wrathful. She was painting, and the men and women were singing, and the air was full of unbearable tension and the wind now was howling, tugging at their clothing, buffeting them — but the easel in its circle of harsh light stood steady and the girl worked on . . . .

There was the dreadful *crack* of lightning close at hand, too close at hand, the *crack* and the dazzle, and the pungency of ozone, and the long, long streamer of blue fire licking out from above their heads and culminating on the plain far below, at the spaceport.

There was the burgeoning fireball where the ship had been.

There was the dreadful laughter,

booming above the frenzy of the wind, and the metallic crash and clatter as the pinnacles, lifted and rolled over the rim of the plateau, plunged to destruction down the steep, rocky mountain slope.

And *They* were there — the robust, white-bearded deity, a lightning bolt clutched and ready in his right hand, and the naked, seductively smiling goddess, and the other naked one with her bow and her leashed hounds, and she in the white robes, carrying a book, with the owl perched on her shoulder. The lame smith was there, with his hammer, and the sea-god, with his trident, and he with the red beard and the helmet and the body armor and the sword.

Somebody screamed, and at least a score of the men and women had

fallen to their knees. But the presbyter stood his ground.

"Who are you?" he shouted. "Who are you?"

"Little man," the great voice replied, "we were, we are and we always shall be."

Grimes realized that he was laughing uncontrollably and saying, over and over to himself, "Not Sinai, but Olympus! Not Sinai, but Olympus!"

There was another supernal clap of thunder and the dark came sweeping back.

They sat around in miserable little groups on the bare mountain top.

The presbyter was gone, nobody knew where or how, and the deaconess, and Smith, and perhaps a dozen of the others. It had been a long night, and a cold one, but the sun had risen at last, bringing some warmth with it.

Grimes, in shirt and trousers, stood with Clarisse Lane, who was wrapped in his jacket.

"But what happened?" he was asking. "What happened? What did you do?"

She said, "I . . . I don't know. I suppose that I do have some sort of power. And I suppose that I am, at heart, one of the Blossom People. Our religious beliefs are a sort of vague pantheism . . . . And, after all, the Father of the Gods is very similar in his attributes to the patriarchal gods of later religious." She looked at the sky. "It's lucky that I'm a telepath as well as being . . . whatever it is that I am. *Rim Sword* will be here very shortly. I hope it's soon. I have a feeling that when some of our fanatical friends recover they'll be blaming me for everything."

"When they recover," said Grimes. "It will take *me* a long time." He added, "But I don't think you'd better return to Francisco with them."

"Ken," she told him, "has already got the formalities under way that will make me a Rim Worlds citizen."

"The obvious ones?"

"Yes."

"And are you going to get married in church?" he asked. "It should be interesting."

"Not if I can help it," she told him.

END

Next month in IF —

## WHERE THE SUBBS GO

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# MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE WORLDCON . . . .

by LIN CARTER

*Our Man in Fandom gives us  
another look at SF's biggest  
convention — until next year!*

**W**e were talking about Nycon 3, the 25th World Science Fiction Convention held over the Labor Day weekend at the Statler-Hilton in New York City. It was the biggest convention in science-fiction history, with a good 1500 fans and pros on the scene, including Your Man in Fandom.

Sunday morning September 3rd, I got to the hotel ready for the third day of the convention and ran into Samuel R. Delany ("Chip" to his friends). I learned that the Edgar Rice Burroughs fans were having a meeting in a restaurant near the hotel. Frank Frazetta came to this "Burroughs breakfast," bringing with him as a surprise guest the great comics artist Hal Foster, who used to

draw the Tarzan Sunday panels and who is best known to the rest of us as the creator of Prince Valiant.

Frazetta and Hal Foster, incidentally, were not the only artists in town for the Worldcon weekend. I also spoke to Roy Krenkel and Jack Gaughan and Gray Morrow. Ed Emsh was at the Nycon too, although I didn't happen to run into him, and so was Ballantine's famous cover artist Richard Powers; I know, because I bought one of his paintings. And my wife Noel, a great Sax Rohmer fan, purchased an oil portrait of Fu Manchu which had appeared on a back cover of *Castle of Frankenstein* from the painter Russ Jones . . . so the art world was well represented at the Worldcon.

## The Great Costume Ball

That night the huge costume ball was held. My wife and I love any excuse to dress up for a masquerade, so she came in glittering plumes, bejeweled as the Queen of Night from Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, while I donned black velvet robes and sparkling horned mitre as the Royal Necromancer of Aquilonia. I discovered later that in all, some 98 people attended in costume. Among them I noticed such famous celebrities as Retief and King Kull and Gully Foyle. Sauron and Fu Manchu and Dian the Beautiful were there as well. And Robert Graves's White Goddess and the Phantom of the Opera, and even the Wizard of Lemuria (1).

Some of the costumes were comical and ingenious; others were elaborate and glamorous, like the glittering tights and headdresses worn by Olga Ley and daughter Sandra, who came as their impression of Bradbury's "Golden Apples of the Sun and Silver Apples of the Moon."

Oh, and Mr. Spock from *Star Trek*. Or, rather, the Mr. Spocks. For I saw no less than seven of the point-eared people. One of them, unless my eyes were deceiving me, was Forrest J Ackerman of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*. The committee judging the costumes really had "Spocks" before their eyes! (Sorry 'bout that: every time I mention or think of Ackerman, my mind starts coming up with puns . . .)

### Parties and Things

You'll find you have the most fun

at conventions during the evenings after the formal program is over and people go room-hopping from party to party. After the ball, my wife and I packed away the costumes, cleaned off the makeup and had some people in for drinks. L. Sprague and Catherine de Camp sat talking to a circle of fans about Atlantis and Stonehenge and that sort of thing, while off in one corner, Roy Krenkel was drawing a sketch for me: I got the chance to meet some interesting people and to talk with them. One young man from New Orleans, knowing me to be a Prince Valiant fan, told me that this year's Mardi Gras in February had been built around the theme of Hal Foster's great comic feature, with costumes and floats and pageants and tableaux. The idea was to celebrate his 30th anniversary of Prince Valiant-ing.

Frankly, I'd never known that New Orleans' famous Mardi Gras did things like that, and I was fascinated to learn this was not the first time Prince Valiant had served as theme and that the Oz books have also been similarly honored in the Mardi Gras. I'd certainly like to be there next time.

Then I got to talking with Fred D. Brammer of McLean, Virginia, a big fan of *Star Trek*. He informed me that Richard K. Preston, executive officer of the National Air and Space Museum Archives of the Smithsonian Institution had recently asked Gene Roddenberry, the producer of the show, for a copy of the first *Star Trek* program for permanent inclusion in the Smithsonian's archives. This is the first time any science-fic-

tion tv show or movie has been so honored, I believe.

Mr. Roddenberry, by the way, was at the Worldcon and showed a segment of *Star Trek* called "Amok Time" scripted by Theodore Sturgeon. He also screened a film of *Star Trek* bloopers which was rather mad.

### The Banquet and the Hugoes

Every year at the Worldcon, a huge banquet is held at which the Guest of Honor delivers his speech and the Hugo Awards are given out. The banquet at Nycon 3 has a record attendance of 583. The toastmaster was Harlan Ellison, whose anecdotal speech was followed by Bob Tucker's even more anecdotal speech. Then the Hall of Fame Award (given annually by First Fandom, a group of fans who have been active in science fiction from the very beginnings of fandom) was given to one of the grand old men of sf, Edmond Hamilton.

Sam Moskowitz presented the award, and Moskowitz's speech, which had earlier been timed to five minutes, ran on and on as if Moskowitz just wouldn't stop talking. It finally consumed a solid *twenty minutes* of tightly scheduled program time. Despite efforts to stop him, he even insisted on reading the lengthy inscription on the Hall of Fame trophy. As a result, Lester del Rey — *the Guest of Honor!* had to cut his own speech down very short. I understand the convention committee is hopping mad about this, and it does seem highly inconsiderate of Moskowitz.

Mr. del Rey's speech was short, terse and intense. He held his audience right in the palm of his hand and made a powerful argument for old-fashioned story-telling in science fiction as against the so-called "New Wave" writers (or "the New Ripple," as Lester called the movement, which has centered around the British magazine *New Worlds* and such writers as Michael Moorcock, Brian Aldiss and J. G. Ballard, among others).

After the banquet, I had a chance to speak to Lester and congratulate him on his Guest-of-Honorship, remarking that it was about time! Lester called to my attention the fact that Catherine Kuttner — Henry Kuttner's widow, a fine writer in her own right under the name of C. L. Moore — has also missed out and well deserves being chosen Guest of Honor at some future convention. Recalling her splendid stories, like the short yarn *Vintage Season* and the famous novel *Judgment Night*, I fully agreed with him.

Several other awards of various kinds were given out. Forrest J Ackerman gave the Big Heart Award to Janie Lamb of the National Fantasy Fan Federation. Ted White got a golden ping-pong paddle for "for keeping fans interested," and the Worldcon presented a special plaque to CBS Television for their *21st Century* show, for "bringing the future into the present."

Then came the Hugoes. To be brief, the Hugoes went to:

Best Short Story: *Neutron Star*, by Larry Niven, from *If*.

Best Novelette: *The Last Castle*, by Jack Vance, from *Galaxy*.

Best Novel: *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, by Robert Heinlein, from *If*.

Best Prozone: *Worlds of If*.

Best Dramatic Presentation: *The Menagerie*, from *Star Trek*.

Best Pro Artist: Jack Gaughan.

Best Fan Artist: Jack Gaughan.

Best Fanzine: *Niekas*.

Best Fan Writer: Alexei Panshin.

This is the FOURTH Hugo that Heinlein has won, and that's more Hugoes than any other writer in science-fiction history has accumulated. His first Hugo came for *Double Star* at the 1956 convention in New York. He won his second for *Starship Troopers* at Pittsburgh in 1960. His third Hugo was presented to him at Chicago in 1962, for *Stranger in a Strange Land*.

As for Jack Vance, this was his second Hugo. He received his first for *The Dragon Masters* at Washington D. C. in 1963.

This was the second year in a row that the Hugo for best professional science-fiction magazine of the year went to this magazine.

And this is the first time in fan-nish history that the same guy won the awards for Best Pro and Best Fan Artist! (Come to think of it, this was also the first time anyone gave out a Hugo for Best Fan Artist.)

One of the most important things that happens at each of these annual world science fiction conventions is bidding for and voting on the site of next year's convention. If you couldn't make this year's Nycon 3, maybe we'll see you next Labor Day weekend, when the 26th World Science Fiction Convention convenes at the Hotel Claremont in Oakland/Berkeley, California. The 26th Worldcon will be called "The Baycon."

I can't tell you very much about it this early — the Guest of Honor will be Philip José Farmer — but a first sketch of Baycon's program has been tentatively announced, and on the program are Anthony Boucher, Robert Heinlein, Keith Laumer, Ray Bradbury, Robert Bloch, Avram Davidson, Joan Baez (!!) and Damon Knight, not to mention a special two-hour segment on Monster Fandom, whose redoubtable host will be genial Forrest J Ackerman.

Fans who want to attend the 1968 Baycon can write to Baycon, P.O. Box 261, Fairmont Station, El Cerrito, California 94530.

Science-fiction conventions have one thing in common with a bus — if you miss one, there's another coming along in a while. So if you couldn't make it to New York this year, try to plan for the Baycon next September.

See you there in 1968 — for the time of your life! END





# THE PRODUCT OF THE MASSES



by JOHN BRUNNER

Illustrated by Bode

*How to study aliens in their native habitat? Why, the best way is to be one, of course!*

*The mutual attraction between two bodies is proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the distance between them.*

— Folk saying, believed pre-atomic

I

“Is anything the matter?” Dr. Le-  
ila Kunje inquired coolly, when

Jeff Hook had been staring into the transpex bubble for a good half-minute or more. It contained . . . a creature. A creature whose dark gray flattened-disk body was suspended from a frame like the ribs of an umbrella and surrounded by more legs than any beast had a right to own if it were larger than a millipede. This thing was a good sixty feet over all.



In addition, its hide hung on it like an ill-fitting flour sack, patched with flakes the color of mildew, gangrene and rust. That was what was riveting Jeff's attention: the half-formed question of how something so deformed and leprous could live.

He tore his eyes away and fixed them instead on what ought to have been, but for some unaccountable reason was not, a far more inviting prospect — the xenobiologist at his side.

"I was just impressing the details on my memory," he lied, then added because he was unsure how well he had concealed his reaction, "It's not a very prepossessing beast, is it?"

"On the contrary," Dr. Kunje said. "It — or to be more exact, *she* is an exceptionally well endowed specimen."

"She?"

"We decided on a female because they are somewhat larger than the males, which gives us additional space inside the carcass, naturally. And also because of the relative territorial habits of the two sexes. The females tend to stay in any given area for a fairly long time. The males roam from place to place. At the stage our survey has now reached we are adequately supplied with the kind of superficial data that can be gathered from a hasty once-over. What we need is the fine detail to complete the picture. Do you follow me?" Dr. Kunje spoke with the politely patronizing tone of the expert forced to enlist the aid of a handyman for a relatively insignificant task.

Jeff gave her the same kind of thoughtful examination he had given

the creature in the bubble and noted a remarkable parallel between her and it. She was — if he wasn't mistaken — potentially a rather beautiful woman: tall, with dark hair and large bright eyes, and a tawny-gold complexion. But, as though to deny any continuity between the part of her that was exposed and the part that was covered, she chose to wear the loosest and baggiest set of all-purpose coveralls he had ever seen and furthermore to string them about and stuff their pockets with whatever could be called on to provide lumps and bulges in the wrong places.

He felt a vague stir of disappointment. The universe was awfully big, and the tiny enclaves of human awareness which were the starships, darting from system to system were oppressively small. They far too easily became boring. Though he had an excellent and reliable crew working under him he could tell that he was near his own personal limit of endurance and might soon start to snap at those he was really most fond of. He had looked forward to this unexpected assignment, calling at the Chryseis research station and helping out with a key project, mainly as a chance to renew his sense of . . . what would you call it? Solidarity? That feeling of companionship, at any rate, which alone sustained wandering humanity among these harsh stars and bleak, uninhabitable planets.

Granted, research scientists were of a different temperament from people who went into the Advanced Guard. Nonetheless, they also being human —

"You do an awful lot of staring, Commander Hook!" Dr. Kunje said sharply.

"I find you much more enjoyable to look at than the creature in there," Jeff said, with a jerk of his thumb toward the bubble. It was a compliment honestly enough meant, but the response it provoked was to freeze her dark eyes into chips of black Plutonian ice.

"You are not here to enjoy anything, Commander!" the xenobiologist said. "You are here to perform a service for us. Can it be done?"

"I guess so," Jeff sighed, and turned to go. When he was twenty paces distant along the tunnel which linked the bubble with the main section of the orbital research station, she called after him.

"By the way, Commander!"

"Yes?"

"Your — shall we say, politely, 'uncalled-for'? — remark just now reminded me of a point I had been intending to bring to your attention. I know that the members of the Guard lead a somewhat irregular life during their long periods on patrol, but that is somewhat excusable in view of the shortage of genuinely demanding tasks they are called on to fulfill. I should just like to make it plain that here we do have such tasks — any number of them. And I have no intention of permitting the *looseness* of your customary behavior to contaminate my staff."

Jeff, struggling through the haze of verbiage, gave a blank headshake.

"I'm telling you, Commander," Dr. Kunje said in an impatient tone, "to keep fraternization to a minimum

during your stay. Do you understand? Or must I draw you physiological diagrams?"

## II

When he re-entered the lock of his own ship, Jeff found two of the research station staff already present, talking with his senior lieutenants: a large, stout, motherly, fair-haired woman of early middle age whom he identified from the records he had studied on the way here as Dr. Ingrid Swann, and a younger man, very lean and nervous but affable in manner whom he recognized as Dr. Matthew Couperin.

Lieutenant Sandy Baravitch was talking as he came in — she had probably been doing most of the talking, as usual — but she broke off in mid-sentence and blew him a kiss of welcome.

"How did you get on with the dragon?" she exclaimed.

Beside her, Lieutenant Tom Cheliki winced and glanced at the strangers, his protuberant eyes very bright in his dark face, but the stout woman gave a wry chuckle.

"Please don't judge all of us by Dr. Kunje!" she said. "It simply wouldn't be fair."

"That's good," Jeff sighed and slumped into a vacant chair around the projector table on which the scientists were displaying the data apparently balanced on treetops in a Chryseian jungle, and he brightened at the sight of them.

"One for you?" Sandy suggested, and suited the action to the word by going to the refreshment dispenser.

"I've just been sternly warned against this sort of behavior," Jeff said. "No fraternizing, to quote the exact phrase."

"You must be joking!" Tom said. "This is our first outship contact in over four months, and for those poor so-and-sos it's the first in — how long did you say, Matt?"

Dr. Couperin stared briefly at the ceiling. "Ah. . . . Eight months, four days and sixteen minutes, to the moment your commander stepped through our lock."

Having lowered the level in his glass by a conservative fifty per cent, Jeff set it down along with the others, on the crown of a remarkable Earth-like tree. "I get the impression that Dr. Kunje likes it that way. What's wrong? Has she been crossed in love, or something?"

"Don't be unkind to her," Ingrid Swann said. "She's an absolutely first-class biologist, and it's something of an honor for us to be working under her."

"What she needs is someone to get to work on her," Couperin said barely audibly and then flushed bright red as he turned to Sandy. "I'm sorry, that was crude! It just slipped out."

But Sandy was grinning so broadly that the freckles on her cheeks had almost disappeared into a succession of dimples. She reached over and patted Couperin's hand understandingly.

"That's okay! So long as somebody retains a sense of humor here I guess we can bear to stick around long enough to do the job your boss wants from us. Jeff, did you get all the de-

tails or do you want us to run through them again."

"To be frank, I cut my interview with Dr. Kunje short," Jeff admitted. "Let's take it again from the top. There was one question in particular I didn't get around to asking, and I should have done so. I gather that Chryseis is pretty well a terra-type world, correct?"

Ingrid nodded.

"In other words, it has CHON-type biology — carbon-hydrogen-oxygen-nitrogen — fairly standard gravity, regular proportions of land to ocean, same general temperature and so forth. Well, in the past century or so we must have run across fifty or sixty worlds of this type. What's so special about Chryseis that it's attracted a research team like yours and that it rates a priority adequate to haul an Advance Guard boat off its routine patrol and enlist our help?"

Couperin leaned forward so that he appeared to be resting his elbows on the treetops within the projector table. "My best guess is a sense of racial guilt," he said.

"What?"

"Let's look at it this way. What were the largest animals ever to exist on Earth?"

Jeff hesitated. "Why. . . . Well, some species of dinosaur, I imagine. Probably *Diplodocus*."

"Wrong. He wasn't the biggest — just the longest. The biggest creatures ever to appear on Earth were the giant whales, and we exterminated them, around the beginning of the twenty-first century." Couperin

hunched a little further over the table. "A couple of decades before we developed skills in biology adequate to find out what made them tick, genetically and otherwise, and preserve them in the new, inhospitable, made-over environment we'd wish on them. They weren't simply hunted to death, though that did reduce the numbers far enough to allow them to give in to the other factors which were operating. Effectively, we poisoned them. When they were weakened by poison disease did the rest.

"Right now, life here on Chryseis is going through a phase of extreme gigantism. It's the first world of its kind we've run across, and it's astonishingly close to Earth in so many chemical ways it holds the promise of millions of valuable clues to what we lost at home just before we learned to comprehend it. Tom, flip back to Shot 19, will you?"

Tom Cheliki operated the projector table's control dial, and the scene changed. Now, it showed a patch of ground with low-growing bushes and a scrawny reptilian creature browsing off them.

Jeff looked down obediently, but after a moment shrugged.

"That little baby," Couperin said didactically, "corresponds to a rat in Earthside ecology, near as dammit. It's a little over ten feet tall."

"What?"

"No kidding, Commander. I said, and I mean, 'extreme' gigantism. Didn't you see Dr. Kunje's pride and joy?"

"The disguise, floating in the transparent bubble?"

"Precisely. Except that 'stalking-

horse' would be a better term. That's an exact replica of — Tom, give us Shot 63, please!"

The scene in the table changed again; this time, it showed a typical specimen of the genus Jeff had already seen, indistinguishable apart from the different distribution of the colored patches on its body and legs.

"We studied five or six hundred examples of *Macrodiscos polychromia chryseiana*," Ingrid explained, "and derived a computer-analyzed cross-section of it, to incorporate every known characteristic — the appearance, the mode of gait, the general behavior, the smell it emits, even. Then we programmed for a carcass matching the description, with space inside it for one standard Advance Guard landing-globe. The idea being — "

"The idea being," Couperin cut in, "that Dr. Kunje is fanatically opposed to *anything*, no matter how slight, which might interfere with the habits of the species under observation. This whole job could easily be done with our own resources, by dropping remotes to the surface. But oh no! Dr. Kunje insists that the *Macrodiscoi* he observed at first hand by something which will pass as one of their own number."

"Tell me something," Jeff said suddenly. "Do you never refer to your boss except as *Doctor Kunje*?"

The two scientists exchanged glances. After a moment, they both shook their heads.

"Good grief," Jeff said, wondering what it would be like to try and cope with his twelve-member crew on a basis of heel-clicking and cries of

*Sahl* instead of laughter, dirty jokes and a great display of overt affection. He was brought back from his fit of speculation by Sandy playing footsy with him under the table, and he cleared his throat.

"Ah — yes! Well, assuming the program for the stalking-horse included the proper specifications for implanting the landing-globe inside it, I don't see why it shouldn't work. There's certainly plenty of room — one of our globes is approximately twenty-seven feet across with the force-shield in full operation."

"Dr. Kunje was very thorough about that," Ingrid said. "You have to give her that: she's always thorough. And the form of the *Macrodiscos* luckily lends itself to the plan. The generators are at the top of the globe, right? And the beastie is more or less suspended from a frame of bone with the nerve tissues running along the — ah — the ribs. But you've seen the actual model we're going to use, so I don't have to explain in detail."

"So the generators can plug directly into the nervous system," Jeff nodded. "That's neat. And I assume you have a program of operation we can simply slot into our own computers?"

"Exactly."

"I see. Tom, chuck me the dial, will you?" Jeff reached out for the projector table controls and wiped the shot currently on display. "So it's going to go like this," he continued, frowning a little because some of the details were still rather hazy, and manipulated the image within the table until it suggested, at least in out-

line, one of the *Macrodiscos*. Into the middle of it, with the greater ease of long familiarity, he injected one of the Guard's landing-globes: the central shaft first, housing the power-sources (tripled against emergency), then the three levels around which the shield projectors radiated blurred streaks of warning red, the uppermost housing weaponry, the central one available for observation, and the lowermost forming the most perfect extension of human reason yet devised, being as it was one huge solid-state computer into which the globe's crew could directly plug themselves simply by laying their hands flat on the contact plates, before their chairs. Doing so was an eerie sensation, but it had its rewards; that, truly, was an extension of consciousness, and he had sometimes suspected that a kind of addiction to it was what kept him on in the Advance Guard, trespassing on planet after inhospitable planet.

He was rather proud of his ability to sketch with the unprogrammed controls of the projector table. He added some fine touches to his drawing — a recognizable caricature of Dr. Kunje, for example, on the middle level, peering out with one hand raised to shade her eyes.

"Don't take all *day*, will you?" Sandy said caustically, and he caught himself with a guilty start. Trying to look as though nothing had happened, he removed his glass — which was now balanced on top of a peculiarly nasty little weapon built into the upper level of the globe — and reduced its contents to nil.

"Is that the general idea?" he asked Ingrid.

"Yes that's fine," she said after a few seconds' contemplation. "I take it that means it can be done."

"Oh, sure!"

"Jeff, just a second," Sandy said, frowning now as she stared into the table. "Matthew, this is the boss species here — correct?"

"No, not exactly," Couperin countered. "There are several others more widely spread over the planet, but this is by far the largest."

"How far is 'far'?"

"Ten or fifteen per cent."

"And what kind of terrain are we going to have to work over when we go down?" Sandy glanced up at him.

"I don't think I told you, but I'm supposed to be the planetside pilot for this crew, which means that whenever we discharge a landing-globe I'm responsible."

"I'll show you." Couperin turned to Jeff. "Ah — Commander, do you mind if I wipe this drawing?"

"Sure, sure! I only wanted to be certain I had the picture firmly in my mind. You needn't bother to store it. Jeff passed over the control unit for the table. "And, by the way, stop calling me 'Commander.' I've decided I won't take that kind of language from anyone except Dr. Kunje."

Couperin looked briefly puzzled, then smiled. He dialed for another picture, and the table produced a revolving globe of Chryseis.

"Here's the territory where the *Macrodiscoi* hang out," he said. A patch on one of the northern land masses flickered white. "As you probably know, the year here is about seventeen months long, and the northern winter is just about ending now.

The preliminary surveys caught the broad outline of the species' summer habits, and we arrived in time to follow through their winter behavior in outline also. What we now want is the — "

"Don't tell me," Jeff cut in. "The fine detail. I get it. So what's the lie of the land like and will you have another drink? Sandy!"

"Mainly savannah. These creatures are herbivorous — oh, thanks very much, I will." Couperin accepted his new drink and took a healthy swig. "Hah! Thank you — this is a very pleasant change from the monotonous stuff we get here."

"**Y**ou get monotonous diets and liquors?" Tom Cheliki said disbelievingly.

"Liquors we get none of," Ingrid said. "It's — ah — not approved. Also it conduces to lax behavior. Not that one really *needs* to be conduced, of course, because hormones are by far the most potent substances yet devised to affect human instincts. *But.*"

"I'm glad we called," Jeff said after a moment of blank astonishment, and everyone burst out laughing.

"Jeff, if you don't mind?" Sandy said, recovering before the others, and on his shrug continued: "This terrain, then! You say savannah? Any — oh — spring tornadoes? Earthquakes? Major risks of that kind?"

"No, it's a pretty hospitable world," Ingrid said. "We have the weather pattern down in detail, and it doesn't include anything worse than the occasional gale. But calling this

simply savannah is simplifying it a bit. There are rocky patches, and even some stretches of fairly respectable forest. No tectonic activity worth mentioning in the range the *Macrodiscoi* cover, though there's a young continent emerging to the south — that one — and we have noted some fairly fierce temblors in the ridge to the east. However — ”

“Commander!”

The word splashed into the room like a rock tossed into wet mud, and they all winced and turned to the entrance. Dr. Kunje stood there, eyes once more like black ice-chips, but this time blazing.

“Commander, I did not expect to have to gloss my instructions with this kind of detail, but I heard bawdy laughter echoing up the tube connecting this ship with the research station and I thought I had better see what caused such unseemly merriment. And what do I find? I find that I should have spelled out my distaste at the idea of any of my staff taking drugs!”

She pointed a shaking finger at the glass Jeff was holding. “That does, does it not, contain *alcohol*?”

“Why, yes,” Jeff said. Denials seemed superfluous. “Mine contains an exact simulacrum of Polish vodka. Would you, perhaps, care for something?”

For long moments Dr. Kunje was speechless. Then, at last and painfully, she forced out, “I shall be *so glad* when the experience is over. And, believe me, I no longer think it was a good idea to enlist the help of the Advance Guard in a purely scientific project!”

She spun on her heel and marched away. The sound of her heels could be heard fading as she stamped along the gravity plates lining the floor of the umbilical tunnel.

Eventually Jeff said, “I seem to have put you in dutch with your boss, don't I?”

“Well, we do have to survive here for another three months minimum,” Couperin said, dutifully setting aside his glass, which was still three-quarters full.

“What's wrong with that woman?” Sandy burst out. “I understood she was a good biologist — doesn't she know anything about the chemical side of human behavior?”

“That, no,” Ingrid said, and gave her habitual wry chuckle, which made her plump body shake clear down to her calves. “We have a theory that she was fathered by a computer. Matt worked out the physical details, if you'd be interested . . . ?”

“Oh, lovely!” Sandy exploded, planting both elbows on the projector table, details of the terrain on Chryseis forgotten. “Do tell!”

“Well, you see, it occurred to some of us that nobody with normal metabolism could be so utterly and entirely frigid,” Ingrid said. “So — oh, Matt, you take it from there. You worked out the program.”

Couperin looked vaguely uncomfortable. “It's just a gag,” he said defensively. “But if you really want to know about it . . . ? Well, I started by considering the subjective aspects, corresponding to signals generated in the human nervous system, if a computer of say quarter-megabrain capacity were connected. . . .”

When he had finished they were almost helpless with laughter; only Jeff retained a modicum of self-control, and he used it to shut the baffles in the umbilical tube and cut off the leakage of sound into the research station.

"It's practically literal!" Ingrid said, when she recovered from her hysteria. "Why . . . Why, just to take one example, Dr. Kunje doesn't like to refer to the tubes which you use to link ships in orbit as 'umbilical'! It brings to mind a process she'd rather forget about, even if the image is an exact one."

"But somebody like that is sick!" Tom Cheliki said, his mirth forgotten in an instant.

"In what sense?" Couperin countered. "She runs a first-rate station, there's no denying. And she has the best record in xenobiology anyone could hope to stack up in a lifetime."

"She's not functioning as a person, though," Sandy said soberly. They were all suddenly not amused. "Jeff?"

As commander of an Advance Guard ship, whose crew had to work in isolation for months at a time on the very fringes of human-explored space and often had to risk their lives on strange planets with no more reward than the occasional use of the consciousness-expanding facilities of a landing-globe, Jeff had to be both a theoretical and a practical psychologist. He said after a pause for reflection, "Yes, Sandy, I'm afraid you're absolutely right."

"What sustains someone in that predicament?" Tom Cheliki demand-

ed. The two scientists, strangers to the close, almost telepathic unity of a Guard ship's crew, stared in bewilderment, feeling that some conclusion had been reached which they did not know about.

It had.

"Being right," Sandy said positively "That so, Jeff?"

"Yes. And there come a time when the personality is stretched like a rubber band — gets caught up in a Zeno Race. The tortoise never does beat Achilles, even if the logic says it does."

"What's a Zeno Race?" Ingrid demanded.

"What your boss is trapped in." Jeff shook himself, as though coming back to the present from a long way off — and that also was partly true. "Someone who is not operating as a normal person can only be operating in accordance with a false idea of a normal person. That false idea is what we nickname a Zeno Race. You know the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise! When the tortoise has gone such a distance, Achilles starts to run, but when he gets where the tortoise was when he started it has moved on, and then when he —"

"Sure!" Couperin said impatiently.

"Well, someone who has to be right in order to survive as a thinking person isn't normal, is he — or she? Most human beings are wrong part of the time. Someone who depends on being right is trapped in a paradox like Zeno's, *having* to be right and each time finding it more difficult to make it there ahead of the crowd. In fact, there always comes a time when the paradox resolves. And un-



less I'm mistaken, your boss just passed it.

"Snap."

Puzzled, Ingrid said, "But —"

"It's just as well she called us in to land you a landing-globe!" Tom Cheliki said, his face drawn and worried. "You might not have spotted it. What do we do, Jeff?"

"We let her be wrong," Jeff shrugged and leaned back in his seat, cradling his drink. "What's more, I think she's already left out of account the factor which is going to demonstrate that she can be wrong. Ingrid, didn't you say something about your having been here throughout the period of winter on the *Macrodiscoi's* range?"

"Why — yes!"

"You'll have to edit me a bit, because I'm not sufficiently grounded in xenobiology to know if the basic assumption is sound, but I suspect that when we put our landing-globe inside your stalking-horse and go down, the following will. . . ."

#### IV

"Now this is going to be perfectly straightforward," Dr. Kunje said as she faced the assembled crew of the landing-globe: half members of the Guard, half members of her own staff with specific tasks to attend to during the descent and the stay on the surface. "Our surroundings may be unfamiliar but our purpose is what it always is on visiting a new planet: to gather knowledge."

She glanced about her rather uneasily, as though oppressed by the blackness beyond the limits of the

globular shield protecting them. Outside was the incredible internal nakedness of the facsimile *Macrodiscos* they had built, its circulation, musculature and in fact every other organ, bar the digestive system, plainly visible, pushed into curious new relationships by the presence of the globe in place of the intestine-equivalents. Their stalking-horse would even be able to breathe, to economize on the power-sources within the globe, which were not designed to make sixty-odd tons of alien protoplasm gallop across a grassy plain at forty miles an hour.

"Finished?" Sandy said briskly from the control console. "Let's go!"

And, permitting just a shade of acceleration to leak through the shield — enough to jar Dr. Kunje on her feet and interrupt her declaration that she had barely started to deliver her speech — she launched her weird craft into atmosphere. Outside the globe: the *Macrodiscos*. Outside the *Macrodiscos*: a shield-unit to absorb and dissipate the friction due to diving through the air a trifle thicker than Earth's, plus a computer with a single program and a homing device with a million-mile range. If something were to go wrong with the plan, they could abandon the carcass they hid inside and signal the external shield-unit to come and fetch them, fast.

Not that Dr. Kunje was expecting any such eventuality; as she had stressed over and over again, their stalking-horse and the program which was operating it were squarely founded on months of careful study of the *Macrodisconi* and related species.

But Jeff was.

Keeping his hands dutifully linked in his lap — no one but Sandy was supposed to touch the contact plates until she had set them safely on solid ground — he glanced at Dr. Kunje in the adjacent chair.

"Excited, doctor?" he suggested, noting how white her knuckles were from tension.

"Why — yes, I suppose I am," Dr. Kunje admitted with a trace of condescension. "It's always most gratifying to see the culmination of a long plan of action working out exactly as predicted, isn't it?"

Jeff kept his thoughts on the subject to himself and merely gave her an apparently confirmatory smile. But, past Dr. Kunje's dark head, he saw Ingrid wink at him.

"We're coming down now," Sandy reported suddenly. "The long-range detectors don't indicate any sizeable animals in the immediate neighborhood. It's roughly an hour before sunset at this point on the *Macrodiscos*'s range — is that all right, Dr. Kunje?"

"Yes, that will do very well. The species is mainly diurnal; the night will give us a chance to acclimatize ourselves and become acquainted with the lay of the land, before coming into overt contact with other members of the species."

"Very good," Sandy said. "I'll touch down and strip away the shield unit — it'll drift a couple of miles over our heads until we send for it again." A pause, then: "There it goes!"

Abruptly there was a landscape outside, lit by a low afternoon sun; they saw it by way of light-fiber

bundles cunningly inserted between the muscles of the stalking-horse which projected their images on to curved screens outside the actual globe. Additionally, of course, they were able to perceive by way of the extensosensors attached to the computer inside the globe, and this Jeff proceeded to do, with an encouraging nod at Dr. Kunje and instructions to close her eyes. A moment to adjust, and then. . . .

It was like being the creature as well as himself, seeing the countryside from a height of twenty feet, hearing its noises, smelling its scents, and moreover being aware of the pressure of gravity, the heat of the sun, the multiple and bewildering positions of the limbs carrying the huge oblate body within which they were hiding. With his own ears he heard Dr. Kunje utter an exclamation; the dry runs they had tried aboard the ship hadn't prepared her for this.

"You'll get used to it," he assured her. "Let's go for a short stroll before nightfall, shall we, Sandy? I think that's a river-bank I see over to the left. We could try following that, to begin with."

In strict obedience to the computer parasitizing on its nervous system, the artificial *Macrodiscos* plodded on all its many feet in the indicated direction. As they rode along, Jeff confirmed what he had been told about the likeness of this planet to Earth, bar the size of the creatures inhabiting it. Grass, bushes, rocks, the color of the sun, all were astonishingly homelike. When they reached the river and were able to look down at it, they found that too



could have been on Earth — a partly dry, pebble-strewn channel along the bottom of which surged the first water released by the spring thaw in the mountains where it took its rise.

Beside him Jeff heard a mutter which sounded suspiciously like a curse and glanced round at Dr. Kunje. She had withdrawn from contact with the computer and was shaking her head with a dazed expression. For want of a better idea, Sandy was turning the beast to follow the downstream course of the river.

"Is anything the matter?" Jeff murmured, taking pleasure he was a trifle ashamed of in repeating Dr. Kunje's own words from the moment of his first encounter with the stalking-horse.

"It's — it's confusing at first, that's all," Dr. Kunje said with a glare and determinedly laid her hands on the contact plates again. "But I think I'm getting the hang of it," she concluded firmly.

"Attagirl," Jeff said under his breath, and added, but not aloud: *You want first-hand data, lady, we provide it for you! Don't blame us when you get what you asked for!*

"Jeff!" Tom Cheliki said suddenly. "Isn't that another of our own species, over there on the right?"

"Yes!" Couperin, who had been adjusting better than Dr. Kunje to the novel sensation of the contact plate before him, opened his eyes to seek the direct image of the other *Macrodiscos* on the external screens.

"So that's what we look like at the moment!" Tom commented wryly. "Tae see oorsel's as ithers see us' — hmmm!"

"Not exactly," Dr. Kunje cut in. "That one's a male. You can tell it by the smaller size and generally lighter build, if you look carefully."

It wasn't the first time she had referred to the greater bulk and stature of the female *Macrodiscos*. Jeff repressed the desire to give a thoughtful nod. But it was all fitting together. Something was definitely amiss in Dr. Kunje's view of how to be human, and the more he learned about her, the more he was certain he had pinned down the problem. The cure was going to be both drastic and expensive, but that didn't matter. The *Macrodiscos* would be here next week or next year, awaiting study, but if things were to go on as at present, Dr. Kunje might not be — and people with her degree of brilliance in xenobiology were few and far between.

Seeing that she had closed her eyes and set her mouth in a taut line of concentration, he was able to signal silently to Sandy, whose head tilted to a mischievous angle. Their steed came to a halt.

"Why have you stopped?" Dr. Kunje said, eyes still tight shut as she had fought to absorb and understand the wealth of sensory data furnished by the computer.

"Ought we not make certain at the first opportunity that other members of the species don't perceive anything wrong with our version of them?" Jeff said.

"Oh — yes, I see. Yes, that's a sensible precaution. Has the male noticed us yet?"

"He surely has," Couperin said.

"And what's more, here he comes!"

A quarter-mile distant across the irregular ground, the monster — smaller only by comparison, for he was himself at least forty-eight feet across and fifteen feet high — had tensed into an alert attitude. All of a sudden, his multiple legs began to propel him violently in their direction.

"That's the aggression-reaction!" Dr. Kunje exclaimed. "But what in the . . . ?" Her voice tailed away.

"Aggression-reaction?" Sandy repeated. "You mean we ought to get out of here?"

"Well . . ." Dr. Kunje opened her eyes and stared helplessly at the rapidly growing mass of the male as it approached. "Well — yes, I suppose we should!"

Compliantly, Sandy instructed their steed to move away, but the male wasn't to be shaken off. At a speed between a plod and a gallop, which became a bit uncomfortable after a while because they were having to allow acceleration forces to affect the interior of the globe — there was no choice short of lifting the entire creature off the ground with their anti-gravs — they fled across the hilly plain, sometimes avoiding, sometimes charging straight through, the clumps of vegetation which dotted it.

"There's another!" Ingrid said abruptly, and they all noticed that a second male had come into view. Its reaction was identical with the first's: it tensed, hesitated and then charged.

Nobody said anything for a while, as Sandy expertly operated the muscles of their steed. Then a third male appeared and did the same as the

others. Sandy contrived to make two of the three collide as they both tried to cut off the same corner around a stand of tall trees, and they forgot the chase in favor of a kind of butting contest, hurling their massive frames at one another with the full force of all their limbs. But the remaining male kept on coming, and inside five minutes there was yet a fourth, discovered as they rounded an outcrop of weathered rocks.

"This isn't precisely what I was led to expect," Jeff said delicately.

"N-no — ah — no, it isn't," Dr. Kunje said with tremendous effort. "Oh my goodness! There's *another!*" She pointed a shaking hand, and she was quite right. One more male had joined the pursuit, this one smaller than the rest and correspondingly better able to dodge and twist as he ran.

"Head for the sunset line," Dr. Kunje said in a depressed voice. "As I told you, they're diurnal. Darkness should enable us to — ah — re-assess our position."

"It certainly seems to need reassessment," Tom Cheliki said in a tone of disapproval. "I understood that disguised as we are we could venture among these animals without causing any disturbance to their regular activities, instead of which the mere sight of us seems to provoke a clear intention to do us serious mayhem!"

"Look out!" Sandy shouted. Their course had taken them back to the river, at a point where it had cut itself a miniature gorge, about forty or fifty feet high, and she had attempted to dodge through the gap. At the

same moment one of the pursuing males, displaying improbable powers of reasoning, had scuttled up the bank and clearly planned to jump down directly on top of them. Only by causing their steed to give a frantic leap to the ground was it possible to avoid the impact. The male slammed to the ground in a thrashing tangle of limbs, and a less farsighted member of the posse ran straight into him, provoking the inception of another butting contest.

For a short time thereafter, with the sun slanting closer to the horizon and the sky darkling, they seemed to be on their own again, and for fear of overstressing the muscles she was controlling Sandy slowed down their headlong run. Shortly, however, one of the males they had left behind reappeared on their trail, moving awkwardly and dragging one of its legs, but determined not to give up.

"Here we go again," Sandy said in a resigned tone and added in a voice that had suddenly changed, "Oh no! There's a great big patch of woodland ahead of us! We can't just charge straight through it, can we?"

Definitely they could not: enormous or not by Earthly standards, even a fullgrown female *Macrodiscos* had to draw the line before trying to brush six-foot tree trunks out of the way like blades of grass.

"So what do we do, Dr. Kunje?" Jeff said in a tone as sweet as honey.

"I . . ." Dr. Kunje put her hand to her head as though dizzy. "I . . ." she said again, and finally, with a miserable cry, managed to finish the sentence. "*I just don't know!*"

"Dr. Swann?" Jeff said.

"We could try merely holding off the pursuit until dark," Ingrid said doubtfully. "It's perfectly true that these things prefer to quiet down at night-fall."

"I'll do my best," Sandy promised, and thereafter there followed a kind of weird game of tag, as she hurled the colossal mass of their steed back and forth among the fringes of the forest. Twice she managed to crash the blundering male into a tree, so that there was an earth-shaking tremor and a brief respite, but before the determined beast was finally out of the running one of the others which they had earlier left behind put in an appearance and joined the chase. Then another fresh one showed up, and things went completely out of control. Wherever Sandy headed for, there was one of the animals ahead.

Darkness settled over the land, and contrary to what had been promised, the pursuit did not slacken for a moment. Jeff kept glancing at Dr. Kunje, making it clear that he expected her to say something, and at long last, with face white and lips trembling, she forced it out.

"I'm sorry! Something must have gone wrong — terribly wrong! Perhaps they can sense that this isn't a member of their own species in some way we never guessed at!"

"You mean we should abandon the attempt and make another try on some other occasion?" Jeff suggested.

"I — ah — I can't even see that another try — " Dr. Kunje gestured helplessly. "Oh, but the whole thing's absurd! I don't understand! Let's just get out of here!"

"Sandy!" Jeff said quietly, and Sandy, shrugging, prepared to discard the stalking-horse. Its umbrella-like upper frame of bones parted, peeled back, and allowed the landing-globe to drift free as the carcass collapsed to the ground. Skillfully she guided the gleaming sphere in among the trees on the fringe of the forest, and at last signaled for the shield-unit hovering overhead to come and fetch them back to orbit.

"I don't understand!" Dr. Kunje whispered. "Oh, this is awful! I was so sure it was going to work — we spent months planning this and we double-checked everything. . . . Commander, what can possibly have gone wrong?"

"Stop calling me that," Jeff said in a tone of deliberate crossness. "I don't even allow my own crew to call me that."

"Wh-what?" Dr. Kunje blinked at him, and the brightness in her eyes trickled over and began to course down her cheeks.

*Drastic, but essential.*

From the corner of his own eye Jeff saw that Ingrid and Couperin were both looking rather embarrassed, as though regretting that they had committed themselves to what they had done. But something of the sort was inescapable; the alternative was for Dr. Kunje to be stretched and broken on the rack of her own need to be infallible.

He said, "What are the males doing now, Tom?"

Tom Cheliki set his hands on the contact plate before him. "Ah . . . Sort of snuffing around the empty

carcass, as near as I can tell. One of them has drifted off already. It seems to be angry about something. At any rate, it's pulling at trees and bushes as it goes by, trying to uproot them. It looks exactly like someone having a temper-tantrum."

"I'm not surprised," Jeff said dryly. "Listen, Dr. Kunje! I want you to answer me a couple of questions. First off, how old are you?"

"What in the galaxy has that got to do with — ?"

"I asked a question!" Abruptly, Jeff's voice was colored with the quality which had made him commander of an Advance Guard crew, a dozen of the most cantankerous, self-willed and unpredictable specimens ever produced by the cantankerous, self-willed and unpredictable species they belonged to. Dr. Kunje's resistance faded into nothing.

"Ah . . . I'm thirty-five. But I don't see why — "

"And at thirty-five have you ever been in love with anybody? *Have you ever been in love?*"

Indignation flared in her face. "Really, Commander! I don't think you have any right — "

"I said quit calling them that," Jeff grunted. "All right, I'll take that for a negative. It explains how you could be so stupid as to think you were wrong when in fact you were absolutely, totally and excessively right."

There was an eternal pause. At last she said weakly, "I was — was *right?*"

"Of course. You're too damned good a biologist not to have been, aren't you? But because you're such

a lousy human being — shut up and wait for me to finish! — because you're a lousy human being you overlooked something that even a complete layman like myself spotted immediately. I'll spell it out for you, since apparently you still haven't caught on."

Jeff drew a deep breath.

"This planet's animal life is pretty close to Earth's, correct? Bisexual, oxygen-breathing, all the rest of it. And as a result of winter-long observations of the *Macrodiscoi* you had a facsimile prepared of a female of that species which combined all the optimum characteristics you'd noted from your study of them, right? No, you didn't actually say that to me, but I figured it out from your insistence on the larger size of the females. You ordered all the best features of the ones you'd studied combined in this artificial version. True or false?"

"Well, naturally, if we wanted to — " Dr. Kunje began.

"Wait for it! And then "when we actually tried to go out among the *Macrodiscoi* without being observed, and a gang of males fell in behind and tried to grab us by the tail, you thought they'd detected the fake and were attacking us, didn't you? Great Galaxies, woman, hadn't it occurred to you that this is *spring*?"

He waited for it to sink in. When he had seen the first light of comprehension dawn on her face, he gestured for Sandy to allow the shield-unit to settle over the landing-globe and carry them away to orbit; she had been holding it off to give him a chance to hit Dr. Kunje with the

truth while she was most vulnerable.

"Honestly, Leila!" He used her first name before adding the final clincher, for good psychological reasons. "What do you think would happen if you programmed a computer to simulate an optimum woman? You think you could wander about on Earth without attracting attention? Of course not! Those males who fell in behind and who couldn't be shaken off weren't trying to attack us! All they wanted to do was exactly what you'd expect them to want in the breeding season. They wanted to make love!"

Leila Kunje put her head in her hands and burst into agonizing sobs.

## V

"Well, I suppose all I can say is thanks very much," Ingrid said as she shook Jeff's hand prior to the departure of the Guard ship. "But I mean a lot more than just that. I have a feeling that from now on Leila is going to be a hell of a sight more human to work with."

"Don't push her," Sandy said from behind Jeff. "It takes an awfully long time to re-integrate a personality that's wandered as far out of orbit as hers had. But I think you're going to be right in the long term."

"Oh, she has plenty of props," Jeff said. It isn't everyone in that predicament who's shown what's wrong by being excessively right. That ought to give her a lifeline to follow out of her present depression."

"How long is it going to take to prepare the new male version of the stalking-horse?" Tom Cheliki asked.



"About a month, I imagine," Couperin said. "By which time the fury of the mating season will be over, and we can conduct our observations under — ah — more relaxed conditions. Are you going to come back and let us borrow one of your landing-globes again?"

Jeff grinned and shook his head. "No, I'm afraid our visit was a traumatic experience for Leila. It would be better to call in another Guard ship for the second attempt."

There was a pause. Suddenly Ingrid put her arms around him and gave him a smacking kiss on the cheek. "That's more like what I wanted to convey to you," she said with

satisfaction. "Working with Leila as she's been most of the time since we joined her here, I'd forgotten how to communicate on that level."

"Me too," Couperin said with enthusiasm and did the same to Sandy.

"Well, don't forget it again," Jeff said, grinning broadly. "Honestly! Putting down a female on that planet who was the local counterpart of Ninon de l'Enclos, Marilyn Monroe and Anastroea Strange, all rolled into one, and expecting the local males to take no notice — I ask you!"

They were still chuckling when the tube linking the Guard ship to the orbital research station parted and the ship went on its lonely way. END



March 23-24, 1968. BOSKONE-5. At Statler-Hilton Hotel, Boston; for information, Paul Galvin, 219 Harvard Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02139. Guest of Honor, Larry Niven; presentation of "Skylark" award; meeting of Tolkien Society, etc. Membership \$2.00.

March 30-31, 1968, MARCON III. At Holiday Inn East, Columbus, Ohio. Guest of Honor, Frederik Pohl; panel discussions, talks, etc. For information: Larry Smith, 216 East Tibet Road, Columbus, Ohio 43202. Membership \$1.50.

April 12-15, 1968. THIRDMANCON. At St. Anne's Hotel, Buxton, Derbyshire, England.

April 19-21, 1968. LUNACON/Eastercon. At Park-Sheraton Hotel, 56th St. and 7th Ave., New York City. Guest of Honor: Donald A. Wollheim. For information: Franklin M. Dietz, 1750 Walton Avenue, Bronx, N.Y. 10453. Membership: \$2.00.

THE PRODUCT OF THE MASSES

May 10-12, 1968: DISCLAVE. Washington D. C. Regency-Congress Motor Hotel. For information: Jack C. Halde-man, 1244 Woodbourne Avenue, Baltimore, Md. Featuring a lively slide show "The Decline and Fall of Practically Everybody" narrated by J. K. Klein and based on his photos of many past conventions.

August 23-25, 1968. DEEP SOUTH SF CONFERENCE VI, New Orleans, Louisiana. Details to be announced. For information: John H. Guidry, 5 Finch Street, New Orleans, Louisiana 70124. Guest of Honor: Daniel F. Galouye. Membership \$1.00.

June 24-August 2, 1968. WRITERS' WORKSHOP IN SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY. Participants may enroll for 2, 4, or 6 weeks; college credit will be given. Visiting staff will be: Judith Merril, Fritz Leiber, Harlan Ellison, Damon Knight, Kate Wilhelm. For information: Robin Scott Wilson, Clarion State College, Clarion, Pa. 16214.

August 29-September 2, 1968. BAYCON: 26th World Science Fiction Convention. At Hotel Claremont, Oakland California. Philip José Farmer, Guest of Honor. More details later. For information: BAYCON, P.O. Box 261 Fairmont Station, El Cerrito, Calif. 94530. Membership: \$1.00 foreign, \$2.00 supporting, \$3.00 attending. Join now and receive Progress Reports.



# SLOWBOAT CARGO

by LARRY NIVEN

*They were destroying an empire  
— and their chief ally was the  
man they had sworn to dethrone!*

illustrated by *ADKINS*

## WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

*Mount Lookitthat the planet is a Venus-sized world circling Tau Ceti. Its only habitable area is a not particularly flat Plateau half the size of California, set on top of Mount Lookitthat the mountain, forty miles above the hellish heat and pressure at the planet's true surface.*

*For three hundred years the colony*

*on Mount Lookitthat has been a two-class system, dominated by the "crew," with the colonists underneath. The heart of the colony is the Hospital, an amorphous structure which incorporates the two slow-boats that once carried men to the planet. One function of the Hospital is Implementation, the army-and-*

police of Mount Lookitthat, led by **JESUS PIETRO CASTRO** as Head. **CASTRO**, who is half colonist, is supervised by **MILLARD PARLETTE**, nearly two hundred years old and pure crew.

Another function of the Hospital is the organ banks. Colonists accused of crimes are taken apart for the organ banks, which are used to cure the sick. Mainly they benefit the crew. Most medicine on Mount Lookitthat involves the organ banks.

The ramrobots come only when Earth's latest discovery is such that it cannot be sent as information in a laser beam. This holds in particular for items of biological engineering, of which Mount Lookitthat has many: indoor grass, housecleaners, architectural coral, mining worms, and so forth.

The **SONS OF EARTH**, a rebel organization, correctly suspect that Ramrobot #143 is something special, though only **MILLARD PARLETTE** knows its full importance. Their attempt to capture the ramrobot package backfires. They lose the package. **POLLY TOURNQUIST** gets pictures; but her attempt to show them at the rebel meeting the next night is interrupted by an Implementation raid.

Cover for the meeting was a party thrown by **HARRY KANE**, leader of the rebels. **MATTHEW LEIGH KELLER**, accidentally invited to the party, was the only one to escape the raid. This is common; people usually ignore **MATT KELLER** when he doesn't want to be noticed.

The next morning Matt, returning to the wrecked house, finds a car

buried in the basement. He has never flown a car; but he manages to reach the vicinity of the Hospital without being killed, though he loses the car in the process. The weird results of his first attempt to sneak into the Hospital make him determined to ask **JAYHAWK HOOD**, who is something of an expert, about psi powers. But Hood is one of the people he's trying to rescue.

His second attempt succeeds, but even more strangely. **MATT** is exploring the Hospital when he stumbles into the organ banks. This throws him off balance entirely, and he makes no attempt to defend himself when a guard stuns him and carts him off to join the others in the vivarium.

**CASTRO** has been busy. He's questioned several Sons of Earth and sent them to the organ banks; he's got **POLLY TOURNQUIST** undergoing the coffin cure: sensory deprivation. Next morning, having followed the odd circumstances of **MATT'S** capture, he sends for **MATT** to be questioned.

Ninety-eight prisoners are in the Vivarium, sleeping under stimulus of the brain's sleep center. Two guards waken **MATT**, handcuff him and lead him off. In the corridor they suddenly forget about him. Matt returns to the vivarium and starts waking prisoners.

Despite spectacular damage done on the way, the subsequent escape is a near-failure. Only **MATT KELLER**, **JAY HOOD**, **HARRY KANE** and a middle-aged harridan named **LYDIA HANCOCK** escape under cover of **MATT'S** odd anonymity.

*POLLY TOURNAQUIST* wasn't even in the vivarium. They take cover in an unoccupied house belonging to one of *MILLARD PARLETTE's* virtual army of relatives.

While *CASTRO* becomes more and more worried — is he being plagued by ghosts? — what's left of the Sons of Earth tries to figure out what makes "the luck of Matt Keller" work. Unexpectedly, *MILLARD PARLETTE* himself appears on the scene. *LYDIA* stuns him, unfortunately; he seemed eager to talk to *HARRY KANE*.

*HOOD's* analysis of *MATT's* power is as follows:

*MATT* has a limited form of telepathy, related only to the optic nerve, which is brain tissue. He can contract the iris of someone else's eye, causing that person to lose interest in whatever he is looking at, particularly if he is looking at *MATT KELLER*. To work the psi power, *MATT* has to be afraid.

For *MATT*, this clears up a lot of his history. It also makes him aware of his need to rescue *POLLY TOURNAQUIST*, assuming she isn't in the organ banks. He accepts *LANEY's* help, with the reservation that *LANEY* will be trying to free the vivarium prisoners once they are inside.

They breach the Hospital wall, using explosives buried earlier by the Sons of Earth. But once inside, *Laney* and *Matt* accidentally become separated.

*CASTRO* has been increasing the Hospital's defenses. He definitely expects an attack; but of what? *MATT's* abnormal abilities, plus the bleeding-

heart symbol *MATT* left in the vivarium, drawn in human blood, have *CASTRO* half convinced that he is being attacked by a ghost. Even *LANEY* can only guess at his new defenses.

At the house, *MILLARD PARLETTE* recovers from the sonic stun attack. He speaks at length, describing the contents of the ramrobot package. Briefly, they are four items of biological engineering turned to medical purposes. They offer alternatives to organ transplant. *PARLETTE* does his best to convince *HARRY KANE* and the remnant of the Sons of Earth, that the arrival of Ramrobot #143 has blown the present social order sky high.

The rule of the crew, he says, is doomed.

## XX

**L**aney had vanished around to the left, around the great gentle curve of the Planck, while *Matt* stood gaping. He started after her, then checked himself. She must know of another entrance; he'd never catch her before she reached it. And if he followed her through he'd be lost in the maze of the Hospital.

But he had to find her. She'd kept him in the dark as much as she could . . . probably because she expected *Castro* to get him and didn't want him to spill anything important. She hadn't mentioned the bomb until the fuse was in her hand; nor the detailed plans for invading the Hospital until she was already following them.

Eventually she'd have told him

how to find Polly. Now he'd lost both.

Or . . . ?

He ran toward the main entrance, dodging police who tried to run through his solid bulk. He would meet Laney at the vivarium, if she got there. But he knew only one route to reach it.

The great bronze doors swung open as he approached. Matt hesitated at the bottom of the wide stairs. Electric eyes? Then three uniformed men trotted through the entrance and down, and Matt trotted up between them. If there were electric eyes here, and men watching them, they could never keep track of the last minute's traffic.

The doors swung shut as he went through. They almost caught him between them. He cursed in a whisper and stepped aside for a running policeman with a whistle in his mouth. Like the ultra-sonic whistle the gate-man had used to get in last night. He'd need one to get out. But later. He needn't think about leaving yet.

His legs ached savagely. He slowed to a brisk walk and tried not to pant.

*Right, up a flight, take a right, then a left . . . .*

#### VIVARIUM.

He saw the door down the corridor, and he stopped where he was and sagged gratefully against the wall. He'd beaten her here. And he was horribly tired. His legs were numb; there was a singing in his head; he wanted to do nothing but breathe. A taste in his mouth and throat reminded him of the hot metal taste of the void mist, when he'd bored for

the bottom less than thirty-six plateau hours ago. It seemed he'd been running forever, terrified forever. His blood had carried adrenalin for too long. The wall felt soft against his back.

It was good to rest. It was good to breathe. It was good to be warm, and the Hospital walls were warm, almost too warm for a cold-weather crewish overjacket. He'd ditch it when it got too hot . . . . Probing idly in his pockets, he found a double handful of unshelled roasted peanuts.

Corporal Halley Fox rounded the corner and stopped. He saw a crew resting against a wall, wearing his overjacket indoors. There was a ragged tear in the crew's ear, and a pool of blood below it, soaked into the neck of his overjacket. He was cracking and eating peanuts, dropping the shells on the floor.

It was strange, but not strange enough.

Halley Fox was in the third generation of a family which traditionally produced Implementation police. Naturally he had joined Implementation. His reflexes were not quick enough to make him a raider, and he made a better follower than a leader. For eight years now, he had been a competent man in a good position which did not require much responsibility.

Then . . . last night he'd caught a colonist invading the Hospital.

This morning there'd been a break from the vivarium, the first since the vivarium was built. Corporal Fox had seen blood for the first time. Man's blood, not drained into an organ-bank tank, but spilled reckless-

ly along a hallway in conscious, murderous violence.

This evening the Head had warned of an impending attack on the Hospital. He'd practically ordered Corporal Fox to shoot his own fellow guards! And everyone was taking him seriously!

Minutes ago, there'd been a hell of a big blast outside the windows . . . and half the guards had deserted their posts to see what had happened.

Corporal Fox was slightly punch drunk.

He had not deserted his post. Things were confused enough. He stuck to his training as something he knew to be solid. And when he saw a crew sitting against a wall eating peanuts, he saluted and said, "Sir."

Matt looked up to see a police officer standing stiff as a board, holding the short barrel of a mercy-bullet pistol slantwise across his forehead.

Effectively he disappeared.

Corporal Fox continued down the hall, stepping wide around the vivarium door. At the end of the corridor he stopped, half turned, and fell.

Matt got unsteadily to his feet. The sight of the guard had damn near stopped his heart.

Laney came around fast. She saw Matt, dodged back, poked the gun around —

"Stop! It's me!"

"Oh, Matt. I thought I'd lost you."

He moved toward her. "I saw someone come after you. Did you get him?"

"Yah." She looked down at Corporal Fox. "They're badly trained."

"Where'd you learn to shoot like that?"

"Never you mind. Come on." She moved back toward the vivarium.

"Hold it. Where do I find Polly?"

"I really don't know. We've never known where they administer the coffin cure." She reached for the door handle. Matt caught her wrist. "Come now, Matt," she said. "You had fair warning."

"The door's booby-trapped."

"Oh?"

"I saw the way that guy walked around it."

She frowned at the handle. Then, with effort, she tore a strip from the bottom of Matt's jacket. She tied it to the handle, moved back as far as it would reach.

Matt backed away. He said, "Before you do something irrevocable, won't you please tell me where to find Polly?"

"Honestly, Matt, I don't know."

She wasn't trying to hide the fact that he was an unneeded distraction.

"Okay, where's Castro's office?"

"You're out of your mind."

"I'm a fanatic. Like you."

That got a grin. "You're crazy, but okay. You go back the way I came, turn the only way you can and go up another flight. Follow the hall until you see signs. The signs will take you the rest of the way. The office is up against the hull of the *Planck*. But if you stick with me, we may find an easier way."

"Pull then."

Laney pulled.

The handle came down and clicked. Immediately something fired from the ceiling: a conical burst of mercy-

bullets spattering the area where anyone would have stood to pull the handle. And a siren blared in the corridor, loud and raucous and familiar.

Laney jumped straight back in surprise, fetched up against the wall. The door swung open a couple of inches. "In," she cried, and dove through, followed by Matt.

The puffs of mercy-bullets were lost in the sound of the siren. But Matt saw four men in the room, crouched in target-shooting position in a line opposite the door. They were still firing as Laney fell.

"Doomed? Really?" Even to himself Harry sounded insane. But he'd expected no such easy capitulation.

"How many Sons of Earth are there?"

"I can't tell you that."

"I can tell you," said Millard Parlette. "Less than four hundred. On all of Mount Lookit that there are less than seven hundred active rebels. For three hundred years you and your kind have been trying to build a rebellion. You've made no progress at all."

"Precious little."

"You enlist your rebels from the colonists, naturally. Your trouble is that most colonists don't really want the crew to lose control of the Plateau. They're happy the way they are. Yours is an unpopular cause. I tried to explain why before; let me try again." With obvious effort he moved his arms enough to fold his hands in his lap. Random muscles in his shoulders twitched from time to time.

"It's not that they don't think they could do better than the crew if it came to the point. Everybody always thinks that. They're afraid of Implementation, yes, and they won't risk their good blood and bone to make the change, not when Implementation has all the weapons on Plateau and controls all the electrical power too.

"But that isn't the point. The point is that they don't really think that the crew rule is *wrong*."

"It all depends on the organ banks. On the one hand, the organ banks are a terrible threat, not only a death penalty, but an ignominious way to die. On the other hand, the banks are a promise. A man who deserves it and can pay for it, even a colonist, can get medical treatment at the Hospital. But without the organ banks there'd be no treatment. He'd die."

"Do you know what your rebels would do if they could beat the crew to their knees? Some would insist that the organ banks be abolished. They'd be killed or ostracized by their own members. The majority would keep the banks just as they are, but use the crew to feed them!"

His neck was stronger now, and he looked up to see patient stares. A good audience. And he had them hooked finally.

"Up to now," he went on, "you couldn't start a rebellion because you couldn't convince enough fighting men that your cause was just. Now you can. Now you can convince the colonists of Mount Lookit that the organ banks are and should be obsolete. Then wait a little. When Implementation doesn't disband, you move."

Harry Kane said, "That's exactly what I was thinking, only you seem to be way ahead of me. Why did you call me silly?"

"You made a silly assumption. You thought I was trying to keep the ramrobot package a secret. Quite the contrary. Just this afternoon I —"

"I've finally got it," said Hood. "You've decided to join the winning side, have you, Parlette?"

"You fool. You badmouthed colonist fool."

Jay Hood flushed. He stood perfectly straight with his arms at his sides and his fists clenched. He was no angrier than Parlette. The old man was trying to shift his weight, and every muscle in his body was jumping as a result. He said, "Do you think so little of me, to think I'd follow such motives?"

"Relax, Jay. Parlette, if you have something to say, say it. If we jump to the wrong conclusions, please assume that you're expressing yourself badly and don't try to shift the blame."

"Why don't you all count to infinity?" Lydia Hancock suggested.

Parlette spoke slowly and evenly. "I am trying to prevent a blood bath. Is that clear enough for you? I'm trying to prevent a civil war that could kill half the people in this world."

"You can't do it," said Harry Kane. "It's coming."

"Kane, cannot you and I and your associates work out a new . . . constitution for Mount Lookitthat? Obviously the Covenant of Planetfall will no longer work."

"Obviously."

"I made a speech today. In fact, I seem to be spending the whole damn day and night making speeches. This afternoon I called an emergency session — rammed it through the Council. You know what that means?"

"Yah. You were talking to every crew on the Plateau, then."

"I told them what was in Ramrobot #143. I showed them. I told them about the organ-bank problem, and about the relationship between ethics and technology. I told them that if the secret of the ramrobot ever reached the colonists, the colonists would revolt en masse. I did my damndest, Kane, to scare the pants off them."

"I've known from the beginning that we couldn't keep the secret forever. Now that thirty thousand people know it it'll be out even faster, even if we were all killed this instant. I did all this, Kane, in order to warn them. To scare them. When they realize that the secret is out, they may be scared enough to dicker. The smart ones will."

"I've been planning this a long time, Kane. I didn't even know what it was that Earth would ship us. It might have been a regeneration serum, or designs for cheap alloplasty components, or even a new religion. Anything. But something was coming, and here it is; and, Kane, we've got to try to stop the blood bath." Gone was Parlette's shortness of breath and his clumsy attempts to make his lips and tongue work against a sonic blast. His voice was smooth and lilting, rising and falling, a little hoarse, but terribly earnest. "We've got to try. Maybe we can find some-



thing both the crew and the colonists can agree on."

He stopped, and three heads nodded, almost in reflex.

## XXI

He saw the four men, and he saw Laney stagger. He tried to turn and run, and in that instant there was a godawful clang, a sound like being inside a church bell. He jumped to the side instead, knowing the hall must be full of sonics.

"Shut the damn door!" a voice yelled. One of the guards jumped to obey. Matt felt the numbness of the sonics, and his knees went watery. He kept his eyes on his four enemies.

One bent over Laney. "All alone," he said. "Crazy. Wonder where she got the clothes?"

"Off a crew, maybe."

Another guard laughed brayingly.

"Shut up, Rick. Come on, lend a hand. Let's get her to a chair."

"A hunting gun. Wouldn't you hate to get shot with this?"

"She came a long way to get to the vivarium. Most of 'em we have to bring."

The braying laugh again.

"Gas bomb didn't go off." One of the guards kicked a metal cannister. Immediately the cannister began hissing. "Nose plugs, quick!"

They fumbled in their pockets, produced things that looked like large rubber false noses.

"Good. We should have done this before. If we keep the room filled with gas, anyone who comes charging in will drop right away."

Matt had gotten the message. He'd

held his breath from the moment he heard the hiss. Now he walked up to the nearest guard and wrenched his false nose away. The man gasped in surprise, looked directly at Matt and crumpled.

The false nose had a band to fit around the neck, and some kind of adhesive to form a skin-tight lock around the nose. Matt got it on and found himself breathing through it, with difficulty. It was not comfortable.

"Rick? Oh, that idiot. Where the Mist Demons is his nose plug?"

"I'll bet the jerk forgot to bring it."

"Get me Major Jansen, please."

One of the guards was using his hand-phone. "Sir? A girl just tried to crash the vivarium. Yes, a girl, a crew girl in colonists clothing . . . . That's right, just one . . . . She's sleeping in one of the seats, sir. We figured as long as she'd gone to all that trouble getting here —"

Matt still felt dizzy, though the door must be blocking the vibrations of the big sonics. Had he been hit by an unnoticed mercy-bullet?

He bent over Laney. She was out of it, for sure. Punctured by far too many anesthetic slivers, her lungs filled with gas, a rhythmic sleep-inducing current playing through her brain . . . ?

He found three wires leading to her headset. He pulled them.

Now she was a time bomb. When everything else wore off, she'd wake up. More of a firecracker, actually, with four armed guards in the room.

"One more thing, sir. The place is full of gas. It's just as well, we think."

"No, sir, we haven't. If you'll turn off the sonics, I'll look." He turned from the phone. "Watts, check in the hall and see if anybody dropped dead out there."

"But the sonics are still going!"

"They should be off. Try it."

A ballpoint pen peeped from the shirt pocket of the unconscious guard. Matt saw it, snatched it and drew rapidly: a heart on the guard's forehead, three drops running down the straight bridge of the nose.

The one called Watts opened the door a crack. No sonic numbness touched him. He opened it further. "Hey!" He snaked out and ran down the hall toward Fox's body. Matt was on his heels.

"It's a guard," he called back.

"Check the ident."

Watts began going through Fox's pockets. He looked up once as Matt sidled past him, then continued with his work.

"It's Elaine Mattson," said Jesus Pietro. "Has to be. You're sure she was alone?"

"If there'd been anyone with her, he would have been in the same condition. I think she was alone, sir."

That made sense. Which was hardly a guarantee, Jesus Pietro thought. "Thank you, Major Jansen. How are the hunting squads doing?"

"They've found nothing, sir. They're still quartering Alpha Plateau. Shall I see how far they've gotten?"

"Yes. Call me back." He hung up and tilted back his desk chair with a frown wrinkling his forehead.

They had to be somewhere on

Alpha. And they couldn't *all* be attacking the Hospital.

Elaine Mattson, captured. Well and good. She must have set off that mysterious explosion to cover her entrance. Had she also worn that Implementation uniform? It might be. She'd pass at a distance, long enough to knock out a crew woman and get a better disguise.

Maybe. Maybe.

He picked up the sixth dossier, the one lying alone next to the stunner. Polly Tournquist's life:

Born twenty-two years ago, first-born in a family with no known connection to the Sons of Earth. *Her father's left eye had come from the organ banks, after he'd lost his own to a fishing fly. A good, loyal colonist. A disciplinarian in his own family.*

Raised on Delta, sector four. Studied at Colony University, with good grades. *She'd met Jayhawk Hood there. Her first love affair. Why? Hood would have made a bad gigolo . . . small, puny, not good looking . . . but some girls like a man with a mind.*

Finished high school and college, went to work at Delta Retransmitting Station. Affair with Hood had cooled to friendship, apparently. But she'd joined the Sons of Earth. *Revolting against authority? Her father would have turned her in, had he known. Look at the lines of disapproval in that ferret face . . . hmm? Without those lines, he'd look something like Jayhawk Hood!*

It all helped. By now she'd been in the coffin cure for thirty hours. If a voice came to her now, the only

sensory stimulus in her cosmos, she'd listen. And believe. As others had. Especially if the voice appealed to the right incidents in her past.

But for now she'd have to wait. The Sons of Earth came first. One down, four to go . . . . Jesus Pietro reached for his cup and found the coffee stone cold.

A question touched his mind. He grimaced, pushed it back to wherever it had come from. He opened his desk phone and said, "Miss Lauesen, will you order me more coffee?"

"Are you sure? You'll be awash with the stuff."

"Just get it. And —" the same thought crawled out into the light, and before he could stop himself — "get me Matthew Keller's file. Not the one on my desk, the one in the dead file."

She came in a minute later, slender and blonde and looking coolly remote, carrying a folder and a pot of coffee. He opened the folder at once. She frowned at him, started to ask something, saw that he wasn't listening and left.

Matthew Keller. Born . . . educated . . . joined Sons of Earth tenth-month, 2384, in middle age. *Why so late? Why at all?* Became a professional killer and thief, stealing for the Sons of Earth, killing Implementation officers foolish enough to venture into the colonist regions in insufficient numbers. *Thief? Damn! Could Keller senior have stolen that car? The car Keller junior rode straight down into the void!* Trapped in sector 28, Beta, fourth-month 2397, captured, convicted of treason,

disassembled for the organ banks. *O Jesus Pietro, you clever liar you. Half the Hospital must know he really went off the edge, forty miles down to Mist Demons and hellfire.*

So? Jesus Pietro dumped his cold coffee into a waste basket, poured a fresh cup and sipped.

A flicking shadow somewhere at the corner of his eye. A noise. *Someone was in the room.* The cup jumped in his hand, searing his lip. He put it down fast and looked around . . . .

He went back to the dossier.

Matthew Keller. What idiot whim had made him ask for this? Keller senior was dead. Crippled, crawling, he'd gone off the void edge split seconds before.

"Castro."

Jesus Pietro looked up with a start.

He looked down. Treatment reports . . . . Not good, but no disaster. Too many people had been injured in the mass escape, but some could be saved. Luckily the organ banks were full. And could be filled again, from the vivarium, once the surgery section found time. Why did everything have to happen at once?

"Castro!"

Jesus Pietro's chin jerked up . . . and he caught himself before his eyes followed. He'd done this once before, hadn't he? There'd been a noise . . . and someone had called his name . . . and what the Mist Demons was someone doing unannounced in Jesus Pietro's private office? He let his eyes travel to the edge of the desk . . . .

Crew clothing.

But it was rumpled and dirty, and it didn't fit, and the hands which rested flat on his desk had dirty short

fingernails. A colonist in crew clothing, for sure. In Jesus Pietro's office. Unannounced. He'd gone past Miss Laussen, unannounced.

"You."

"That's right. Where is she?"

"You're Matthew Keller."

"Yes."

"How did you get in here?" somehow he kept the tremor out of his voice and was proud of it.

"None of your business. Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Don't give me that. Where's Polly?"

"I can't tell you that. Or anything else," said Jesus Pietro. He kept his eyes fixed on the man's stolen gold belt buckle.

At the periphery of his vision he saw two big, none too clean hands reach down to his own right hand. His visitor leaned heavily on that hand, and when Jesus Pietro belatedly tried to withdraw it he couldn't. He saw his visitor take hold of his middle finger and bend it back.

The pain was shocking. Jesus Pietro's mouth came wide open, and he looked up to plead . . . .

He was reaching for Polly Tournquist's folder when agony struck his hand. He snatched it back as if trying to get it off a hot stove. Reflex. The middle finger stuck out at right angles to the knuckles.

Mist Demons, it hurt! How the blazes had he —

"Well, Castro?"

He remembered enough, barely enough, not to look up. Someone or something was in this room, some-

thing or someone with the power to make people forget. He made a logical connection and said, "You."

"Right. Where's Polly Tournquist?"

"You. Matthew Keller. So you came for me."

"Let's not play games. Where's Polly?"

"Were you in the car that attacked the Hospital? The one that dove straight down —"

"Yes."

"Then how —"

"Shut up, Castro. Tell me where Polly is. Now. Is she alive?"

"You'll get no information from me. How did you get back from the void?"

"I flew back."

"I mean the first time."

"Castro, I could break every finger in both your hands. Now where's Polly? Is she dead?"

"Would I talk if you did?"

There was hesitation. Then two arms converged on his right hand. Jesus Pietro yelped with the pain and reached with clawed fingers for a pair of eyes . . . .

He was halfway through a stack of reports when agony bit into his hand. He found two fingers of his right hand bent back at right angles to the palm. With his teeth clenched hard on a scream, Jesus Pietro turned on the intercom. "Get me the doctor."

"What's wrong?"

"Just get me the —" His eyes caught a flash of movement. Someone in the office with him!

"You're right," said a voice. "I can't torture anything out of you."

Faint, fading memories told him not to look up. He said, "You."

"Go fly a bicycle."

"Matthew Keller?"

Silence.

"Answer me, damn you! How did you get back?"

Two hands slapped together on Jesus Pietro's right hand. His whole face clamped down on the scream, and Jesus Pietro snatched up his stunner and looked wildly for a target.

He looked up again when the doctor entered.

"No point in replacing them," said the doctor. "They're only dislocated." And he deadened Jesus Pietro's arm, set the fingers and splintered them. "How the Mist Demons did you do it?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? You dislocated two fingers and you can't quite recall —"

"Get off my back. I said I can't remember what happened to my hand. But I think that infernal ghost, Matthew Keller, must have had something to do with it."

The doctor gave him a very peculiar look. And left.

Jesus Pietro looked ruefully at his right arm, splinted and dangling from a sling. *Oh, fine.* And he genuinely couldn't remember anything about it.

Which was why he kept thinking about Matthew Keller.

But why did he keep thinking about Polly Tournquist?

It was time and past time for the next phase of her treatment. But surely she could wait? Of course she could.

He tried his coffee. Too cool. He poured it back into the pot and started fresh.

His arm felt like dead meat.

Why did he keep thinking about about Polly Tournquist?

"Phut!" He stood up clumsily, because of his bound arm. "Miss Lauesen," he told the intercom, "get me two guards. I'm going over to the *Planck.*"

"Will do."

He was reaching for the stunner on his desk when something caught his eye. It was the dossier for Matthew Keller, senior. A crude drawing defaced its yellow cover.

Two open arcs, joined, in black ink. Three small closed loops beneath.

The bleeding heart. It certainly hadn't been there before.

Jesus Pietro opened the folder. He could smell his own fear, and feel it, in the cool perspiration that soaked his shirt. As if he'd been afraid for hours.

Front and side views. Blue eyes, yellow hair, skin beginning to puff out with age . . . .

Something stirred somewhere in Jesus Pietro's mind. For just a moment the face in the folder became younger. Its expression changed slightly, so that it seemed both frightened and angry. There was blood soaking into its collar, and a piece freshly bitten from its ear.

"Your guards have just arrived, sir."

"Thank you," said Jesus Pietro. He took one last look at the dead man and closed the folder. He put the stunner in his pocket before leaving his office.

“I wish we could warn Laney,” said Harry Kane. “This changes everything.”

“You wouldn’t even know what to tell her yet. Here, take this out.” Mrs. Hancock put a steaming pitcher of hot cider on a tray, added four mugs.

They were in the kitchen. Hood was in the living room, with Millard Parlette. Parlette, leaning on Jay Hood, had managed to stagger into the living room and into an armchair.

It had seemed a good time to call a break.

The wind screamed against black windows. To four conspirators in front of a convincing fire, drinking hot spiced cider against the vicarious cold, the living room seemed a haven.

A temporary haven.

“You’ve been thinking about this longer than we have,” said Harry. “We never dreamed the crew might compromise. Just what are you prepared to offer?”

“To start with, amnesty for the Sons of Earth, for you and whoever remains in the vivarium. That comes free. We’ll need you. Once the colonists lose faith in the crew, you’ll be the only force for law and order in the colony regions.”

“That’ll be a switch.”

“We need to discuss three types of medical care,” said Millard Parlette. “Organic transplants, the ramrobot gifts and minor medical treatment. You already have some access to standard drugs, at the medcheck stations. We can expand those. I’m sure we can offer free access to the heart-

beasts and liverbeasts and so forth. For awhile your colonists will have to come up to the Hospital to get treatment with the ramrobot symbiots, but eventually we can build culture tanks in Gamma and Delta and Eta.”

“Very good. What about the organ banks?”

“Right.” Millard Parlette wrapped his arms around his narrow ribcage and stared into the fire. “I couldn’t plan for that part, because I didn’t know just what technological change was coming. What are your ideas?”

“Abolish the organ banks,” Mrs. Hancock said firmly.

“Throw away tons of organic transplant material? Dump it on the grass?”

“Yes!”

“Would you also abolish crime? The organ banks are our only way to punish thieves and murderers. There are no prisons on Mount Look-itthat.”

“Then build prisons! You’ve been killing us long enough!”

Parlette shook his head.

Harry Kane intervened. “It wouldn’t work. Look, Lydia, I know how you feel, but we couldn’t do it. If we dumped all that transplant material out we’d have the whole Plateau against us. We can’t even abolish execution by the organ banks, partly because crime would run rampant without capital punishment, and partly because there are too many crew like Parlette, who need the banks to live. If we did that we might as well declare war here and now.”

Lydia turned appealingly to Hood.

“I pass,” said Hood. “I think you’re

all ignoring something important."

Harry said, "Oh?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'll have to wait and see. Keep talking."

"I don't understand," said Lydia. "I don't understand any of you. What have we been fighting for? What have we been dying for? To smash the organ banks!"

"You're overlooking something, Mrs. Hancock," Parlette said gently. "It isn't that the crew wouldn't agree to that, and it isn't that the colonists wouldn't agree to that. They wouldn't, of course. But I won't let you kick in the organ banks."

"No." Lydia's words dripped scorn. "You'd have to die then, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would. And you need me."

"Why? What have you got for us besides your influence and your good advice?"

"A small army. I have more than one hundred lineal descendants. They've been prepared for this day for a very long time. Not all of them will follow me, but most will obey my orders without question. They all have hunting weapons."

Lydia sighed, raggedly.

"We'll do our best, Mrs. Hancock. We can't eliminate the organ banks, but we can eliminate the injustice."

"What we'll have to do," said Harry, "is establish a first come, first serve basis for what's already in the banks. Whoever gets sick first . . . you see what I mean. Meanwhile we set up a new code of law, so that a crew stands just as much chance of getting into the banks as a colonist."

"Don't push too hard there, Kane.

Remember, we have to satisfy both groups."

"Phut!" said Lydia Hancock. It was hard to tell whether she was ready to cry or to start a fistfight.

They were a circle of three, leaning toward each other across the coffee table, holding forgotten mugs. Hood sat a little back from the coffee table, ignored, waiting for something.

"The thing is," said Parlette, "we can make everyone equal before the law. We can do that and get away with it, provided that there is no redistribution of property. Do you agree to that?"

"Not completely."

"Look at the logic. Everyone is equal in the courts. A crime is a crime. But the more property a man has, the less likely he is to want to commit a crime. It gives the crew something to protect, and it gives the colonist something to gain."

"It makes sense, yes. But there are a few things we'll want."

"Go ahead."

"Our own electrical power sources."

"Fine. We'll supply it free until we can build plants on Gamma and Delta. We can put hydraulic plants along the Muddy and Long Fall Rivers."

"Good. We want free access to the organ banks, guaranteed."

"That's a problem. An organ bank is like any other bank. You can't take out more than you put in. We'll have less condemned criminals and a lot more sick colonists to take care of."

Hood had his chair tilted back on two legs, with his feet on the

edge of the table. His eyes were half closed, as if he were dreaming pleasant daydreams.

"Lotteries, then, fair lotteries. And And heavy research into alloplasty, financed by the crew."

"Why the crew?"

"You've got all the money."

"We can work out a graduated tax. Anything else?"

"There are a lot of unjust laws. We'll want to build houses as we see fit. No restrictions on the clothes we wear. Free travel. The right to buy machinery, any machinery, at the same price a crew pays. We'll want to put some solid restrictions on Implementation —"

"Why? They'll be police. They'll be enforcing *your* laws."

"Parlette, have you ever had a squad of police come crashing

through the wall of your house, throwing mercy-bullets and sleepy gas around, dragging housecleaners into the light, tearing up the indoor lawn —"

"I've never been a rebel."

"The hell you say."

Parlette smiled. It made him look too much like a death's head. "I've never been caught."

"Point is, Implementation can do that to anyone. And does, constantly. The householder doesn't even get an apology when they don't find evidence of crime."

"I hate to restrict the police. It's a sure route to chaos. Parlette took a long swallow of cider. "All right, how does this sound? There used to be a thing called a search warrant. It kept the UN police from entering any home unless they had a good and





sufficient reason, one they could show to a judge."

"Sounds good."

"I can look up the details in the library."

"Another thing. As things stand now, Implementation has an exclusive monopoly on prisoners. They catch 'em, decide whether they're guilty and take 'em apart. We ought to split those functions up somehow."

"I've thought about that, Kane. We can establish laws such that no man can be executed until he has been declared guilty by a clear majority of ten men. Five crew, five colonists, in cases where crew and colonists are both involved. Otherwise, trial by five of the prisoner's own social group. All trials to be public, on some special teedee channel."

"That sounds —"

"I knew it." Jay Hood dropped back into the discussion with a thump of chair legs on flooring. "Do you realize that every suggestion either of you has made tonight would take power away from the Hospital?"

Parlette frowned. "Perhaps. What does it matter?"

"You've been talking as if there were two power groups on Mount Lookitthat. There are three! You, us and the Hospital, and the Hospital is the most powerful. Parlette, you've been studying the Sons of Earth for Mist Demons know how long. Have you spent any time studying Jesus Pietro Castro?"

"I've known him a long time." Millard Parlette considered. "At least, I know he's competent. I don't suppose I really know how he thinks."

"Harry does. Harry, what would

Castro do if we tried to put all these restrictions on his police?"

"I don't understand you," said Millard Parlette. "Castro is a good, loyal man. He has never done anything that wasn't in the best interests of the crew. Perhaps I don't know him socially, but I do know that he regards himself as a servant of the crew. Anything the crew accepts, he will accept."

"Damn it, Hood's right," said Harry Kane. "I know Castro better than I knew my father. I just hadn't thought of this."

"Jesus Pietro Castro is a good, loyal —"

"— Servant of the crew. Right. Now hold on just a minute, Parlette. Let me speak."

"First of all, what crew? What crew is he loyal to?"

Parlette snorted. He picked up his mug and found it empty.

"He's not loyal to any specific crew," said Harry Kane. "In fact he doesn't respect most crew. He respects you, and there are others who fit his ideals, but what he's loyal to is a sort of ideal crew: a man who does not overspend, is polite to his inferiors and knows exactly how to treat them and has the best interests of the colonists in his mind at all times. This image is the man he serves."

"Now, let's look for a moment at what we propose to do. Search warrants for the Implementation police. We remove Implementation's power to choose what colonists get the left-over materials from the organ banks. We tell them who they may and may

not execute. Anything else, Jay?"

"Power. We're taking the electrical monopoly away from the Hospital. Oh, and with less restrictions on the colonists, the police would have less work to do. Castro would have to fire some of 'em."

"Right. Now, you don't suppose every crew on the Plateau is going to agree with all of that, do you?"

"No, not all. Of course not. We may be able to swing a majority. At least a majority of political power."

"Damn your majority. What crew is Castro going to be loyal to? You can name him."

Parlette was rubbing the back of his neck. "I see your point, of course. Given that you've analyzed Castro correctly, he'll follow the conservative faction."

"He will, believe me. The crew who would rather die than accept our compromise is the man he'll follow. And all of Implementation will follow him. He's their leader."

"And they've got all the weapons," said Hood.

**B**leeding heart. Matthew Keller. Polly Tournquist.

Why Polly Tournquist?

She could have nothing to do with the present trouble. Since Saturday evening she had been suffering sensory deprivation in the coffin cure. Why must he be haunted by the colonist girl? What was her hold on him, that she could pull him away from his office at a time like this? He hadn't felt a fascination like this since —

He couldn't remember, at least not very well.

The guard in front of him stopped suddenly, pushed a button in the wall and stepped aside. Jesus Pietro jerked back to reality. They had reached the elevator.

The doors slid back, and Jesus Pietro stepped in, followed by the two guards.

(*Where's Polly?* Deep in his mind something whispered. *Where is she?* Subliminally, he remembered. *Tell me where Polly is!*)

Bleeding heart. Matthew Keller. Polly Tournquist.

Either he'd finally lost his mind — and over a colonist girl! — or there was some connection between Matthew Keller and Polly Tournquist. But he had no evidence of that at all.

Perhaps the girl would be able to tell him.

And if she could, certainly she would.

**M**att had trailed them to the end of a blind corridor. When they stopped, Matt stopped too, confused. Was Castro going to Polly, or wasn't he?

Doors slid back in the wall, and Matt's three guides entered. Matt followed, but stopped at the doors. The room was too small. He'd bump an elbow and get shot . . .

The doors closed in his face. Matt heard muted mechanical noises, diminishing.

What in blazes was it, an airlock? And why here?

He was at the end of a dead-end corridor, lost in the Hospital. The Head and two guards were on the other side of those doors. Two guards, armed and alert . . . but they were

the only guides he had. Matt pushed the big black button which had opened the doors.

This time they stayed closed.

He pushed it again. Nothing happened.

Was he doing exactly what the guard had done? Had the guard used a whistle, or a key?

Matt looked down the hall to where it bent, wondering if he could make his way back to Castro's office. Probably not. He pushed the button again . . . .

A muted mechanical noise, nearly inaudible, but rising.

Presently the doors opened to show a tiny, boxlike room, empty.

He stepped in, crouched slightly, ready for anything. There were no doors in the back. How had the others left? Nothing. Nothing but four buttons labeled 1, 2, DOOR OPEN, EMERGENCY STOP.

He pushed them in order. 1 did nothing. He pushed 2, and everything happened at once.

The doors closed.

The room started to move. He felt it, vibration and uncanny pressure against the soles of his feet. He dropped to his hands and knees, choking off a yell.

The pressure was gone, but still the room quivered with motion, and still there was the frightening, unfamiliar sound of machinery. Matt waited, crouching on all fours.

There was a sudden, foreign feeling in his belly and gonads, a feel of falling. Matt said, "Wump!" and clutched at himself. The box jarred to a stop.

The doors opened. He came out.

He was on a high, narrow bridge. The moving box was at one end, supported in four vertical girders which dropped straight down into a square hole in the roof of the Hospital. At the other end of the bridge was a similar set of girders, empty.

Matt had never been this high outside a car. All of the Hospital was below him, lit by glare lights: the sprawling amorphous structure of rooms and corridors, the inner grounds, the slanting wall, the defense perimeter, the trapped forest and the access road. And rising up before him was the vast black hull of the *Planck*.

Matt's end of the bridge was just outside what was obviously the outer hull of the ancient slowboat. The bridge crossed the chisel-sharp ring of the leading edge, so that its other end was over the Attic.

The *Planck*. Matt looked down along the smooth black metal flank of the outer hull. For most of its length the ship was cylindrical; but the tail, the trailing edge, flared outward for a little distance, and the leading edge was beveled like a chisel, curving in at a thirty degree angle to close the twenty-foot gap between outer and inner hulls, the gap that held the guts of the ship. More than halfway down, just below a ring of narrow windows, the roof of the Hospital moved in to grip the hull.

Something hummed behind him.

The moving box was on its way down.

Matt watched it go, and then he started across the bridge, sliding his hands along the hip-high handrails.

The dropping of the box might mean that someone would be coming up.

At the other end he looked for a black button in one of the four supporting girders. It was there, and he pushed it. Then he looked down.

The Attic, the space enclosed by the inner hull, was as perfectly cylindrical as a soup can with both ends removed. Four airfoils formed a cross at the stern, a few yards above the ground, and where they crossed was a bulky, pointed casing. There was a ring of four windows halfway down the inner hull. The airlock was at the same level. Matt could see it by looking between the hull and the moving box, which was rising toward him.

Matt felt a chill as he looked down at that pointed casing between the fins. The ship's center of mass was directly over it. Therefore it had to be the fusion drive.

The *Planck* was rumored to be a dangerous place, and not without reason. A ship that had carried men between the stars, a ship three hundred years old, was bound to inspire awe. But there was real power here. The *Planck's* landing motors should still be strong enough to hurl her into the sky. Her fusion drive supplied electrical power to all the colonist regions: to teedee stations, homes, smokeless factories . . . and if that fusion plant ever blew, it would blow Alpha Plateau into the void.

Somewhere in the lifesystem, sandwiched between inner and outer hull, were the controls that could blow the bomb in that casing. The Head was in there too . . . somewhere.

If Matt could bring them together . . . .

The moving box reached the top, and Matt entered.

It dropped a long way. The *Planck* was tall. Even the beveled ring of the leading edge, which had held stored equipment for the founding of a colony, was forty feet high. The ship was one hundred and eighty feet high, including a landing skirt; for the inner hull did not quite reach the ground. The stern, and the mouths of the landing motors, were supported ten feet above the ground by that flaring, skirtlike extension of the outer hull.

This moving box was an open grid. Matt could watch his progress all the way down. Had he been acrophobic, he'd have been insane before the box stopped opposite the airlock.

The airlock was not much bigger than the moving box. Inside, it was all dark metal, with a dial-and-control panel in chipped blue plastic. Already Matt was heartily sick of blinking dials and metal walls. It was strange and discomfoting to be surrounded by so much metal, and unnerving to wonder what all those dials were trying to tell him.

Set in the ceiling was something Matt had trouble recognizing. Something simple, almost familiar . . . ah. A ladder. A ladder, running uselessly from door to wall across the ceiling of the airlock.

Sure. With the ship spinning in space, the outer door would be a trap door down from the Attic. Of course you'd need a ladder. Matt grinned

and strode through the airlock and nearly ran face on into a policeman.

"The luck of Matt Keller" had no time to work. Matt dodged back into the airlock. He heard a patter of mercy-bullets, like gravel on metal. In a moment the man would be around the corner, firing.

Matt yelled the only thing he could think of. "Stop! It's *me!*"

The guard was around in the same instant. But he didn't fire yet . . . and he didn't fire yet . . . and presently he turned and went, muttering a surly apology. Matt wondered who he'd been taken for. It wouldn't matter, the man had already forgotten him.

Matt chose to follow him, instead of turning the other way. It seemed to him that if a guard saw two men approach, and ignored one, and recognized the other . . . he wouldn't shoot, no matter how trigger-happy he was.

The corridor was narrow, and it curved to the left. Floor and ceiling were green. The left-hand wall was white, set with uncomfortably bright lights, and the wall on the right was black, with a roughened, rubbery surface, obviously designed as a floor. Worse yet, the doors were all trap-doors, leading down into the floor and up into the ceiling. Most of the doors were open, and ladders led up into these. All the ladders and walkways looked old and crude, colony-built, and all were riveted into place.

It was eerie. Everything was on its side. Walking through this place was like defying gravity.

Matt heard sounds and voices from some of the rooms above. They told

him nothing. He couldn't see what was happening above him, and he didn't try. He was listening for Castro's voice.

If he could get the Head to the fusion-drive controls . . . where ever they were . . . then he could threaten to blow up the *Planck*. Castro had held out under the threat of physical pain. But how would he react to a threat to Alpha Plateau?

And all Matt wanted was to free one prisoner.

. . . That was Castro's voice.

Coming not from the ceiling but from underfoot, from a closed door. Matt bent over the walkway across it, and tried the handle. Locked.

Knock? But all of Implementation was on edge tonight, ready to shoot at anything. Under such circumstances Matt could be unconscious and falling long seconds before a gunman could lose interest in him.

No way to steal a key, to identify the right key. And he couldn't stay here forever.

If only Laney were here now . . .

## XXIII

*A* voice. Polly jerked to attention . . . except that she felt no jerk. She did not know if she had moved or not.

*A* voice. For some timeless interval she had existed with no sensation at all. There were pictures in her memory, and games she could play in her mind, and for a time there had been sleep. Some friend had shot her full of mercy-bullets. She remembered the sting, vividly. But she'd wakened. Mental games had failed; she couldn't

concentrate. She had begun to doubt the reality of her memories. Friends' faces were blurred. She had clung to the memory of Jay Hood, his sharp-edged, scholarly face, easy to remember. Jay. For two years they had been little more than close friends. But in recent hours she had loved him hopelessly: his was the only visual image that would come clear to her, except for a hated face, wide and expressionless, decorated with a bright snowy mustache: the face of the enemy. But she was trying to make Jay come too clear, to give him texture, expression, meaning. He had blurred; she had reached to bring him back; he had blurred more . . .

*A voice.* It had her complete attention.

"Polly," it said, "you must trust me."

She wanted to answer, to express her gratitude, to tell the voice to keep talking, to beg it to let her *out*. She was voiceless.

"I would like to free you, to bring you back to the world of sense and touch and smell," said the voice. Gently, sympathetically, regretfully, it added, "I cannot do that just yet. There are people making me keep you here."

*A voice* had become *the voice*, familiar, wholly reassuring. Suddenly she placed it.

"Harry Kane and Jayhawk Hood. They won't let me free you."

Castro's voice! She wanted to scream.

". . . Because you failed in your mission. You were to find out about ramrobot number one forty-three. You failed."

*Liar! Liar! I didn't fail!* She wanted to scream out the truth, all of the truth. At the same time she knew that that was Castro's aim. But she hadn't talked in so long!

"Are you trying to tell me something? Perhaps I can persuade Harry and Jayhawk to let me free your mouth. Would you like that?"

*I'd love that,* Polly thought. *I'd tell all the secrets of your ancestry.* Something within her was still rational. The sleep, that was what had done it. How long had she been here? Not years; not even days; she would have been thirsty. Unless they'd given her water intravenously . . . . But however long it had been, she'd slept for some part of the time. Castro didn't know about the mercy-bullets. He'd come hours early.

Where was the voice?

All was silent. Faintly she could hear her pulse beating in her carotid arteries; but as she grasped for the sound, it too was gone.

Where was Castro? Leaving her to rot?

*Speak!*

*Speak to me!*

**T**he *Planck* was big, but its life-system occupied less than a third of its volume: three rings of pressurized compartments between the cargo holds above and the water fuel tanks and fission-driven landing motors below. Much cargo had been needed to set up a self-sufficient colony. Much fuel had been needed to land the *Planck*. Trying to land on the controlled hydrogen bomb of the fusion drive would have been like landing a blowtorch on a featherbed.

So the lifiesystem was not large. But neither was it cramped, since the compartments aft of the corridor had been designed for the comfort of just three growing families.

That which was now Jesus Castro's interrogation room had once been a living room, with sofas, a card table, a coffee table, a reader screen connected to the ship's library, a small refrigerator. The tables and other things were gone now, cut from the outer wall with torches, long ago. It had been a big room, luxuriously so for a spacecraft, where room is always at a premium. It had had to be big. Any normal apartment dweller can step outside for a breath of air.

Now, upended, the room was merely tall. Halfway up the walls were the doors which had led to other parts of the apartment. The door to the corridor had become a trap door, and the door just under it, a closet to hold spacesuits in case of emergency, could now be reached only from the ladder. In the crescent of floor space at the bottom of the room were a long, heavy box, two guards in chairs, a third empty chair, and Jesus Pietro Castro, closing the padded lip of the speaking tube at one corner of the box.

"Give her ten minutes to think it over," he said. He glanced at his watch, noted the time.

His handphoned buzzed.

"I'm in the vivarium," Major Jansen reported. "The girl's a colonist, all right, in stolen clothing. We don't know where she got it yet. I doubt we'll like the answer. We had to pump antidotes into her; she was dying — overdose of mercy-weapons."

"No sign that anyone came with her?"

"I didn't say that, sir. There are two things. One, the wires were pulled on the chair she was sitting in. Her helmet was stone dead. She couldn't have done that herself. Maybe that's why one of the prisoners woke up this afternoon."

"And then he freed the others? I don't believe it. We would have noticed the pulled wires afterward."

"I agree, sir. So somebody pulled the wires after she was in the chair."

"Maybe. What's your second point?"

"When the gas went off in the vivarium, one of the four police wasn't wearing his nose plug. We haven't been able to find it anywhere. His locker's empty, and when I called his wife she said he took it with him. He's awake now, but he has no idea —"

"Is it worth bothering with? The guards aren't used to gas filters. Or gas."

"There was a mark on the man's forehead, sir. Like the one we found this afternoon, only this one is in ballpoint ink."

"Oh."

"Which means that there must be a traitor in Implementation itself, sir."

"What makes you think so, Major?"

"The bleeding-heart symbol does not represent any known revolutionary organization. Further, only a guard could have made that mark. Nobody else has entered the vivarium tonight."

Jesus Pietro swallowed his impatience. "You may be right, Major. Tomorrow we'll devise ways to smoke them out."

Major Jansen made several suggestions. Jesus Pietro listened, made appropriate comments, and cut him off as soon as he could.

A traitor in Implementation? Jesus Pietro hated to think so. It was possible, and not a thing to be ignored; but the knowledge that the Head suspected such a thing could damage Implementation morale more than any possible traitor.

In any case, Jesus Pietro was not interested. No traitorous guard could have moved invisibly in Jesus Pietro's office. The bleeding heart was something else entirely.

Jesus Pietro called the power room. "You aren't doing anything right now, are you? Good. Would one of you bring us some coffee?"

Three minutes more, and he could resume interrogation.

Jesus Pietro paced. He walked off balance, with one arm bound immobile against his body: one more annoyance. The numbness was wearing off in his mangled hand.

Yes, the bleeding heart was something else again. A gruesome symbol on a vivarium floor. Fingers that broke without their owner noticing. An ink drawing appearing from nowhere on a dossier cover, like a signature. A signature.

Intuition was tricky. Intuition had told Jesus Pietro that something would happen tonight. And something had; but what? Intuition, or something like it, had brought him here. Surely he'd had no logical rea-

son to keep thinking about Polly Tournquist. Did she really know something? Or did his subconscious mind have other motives for bringing him here?

Jesus Pietro paced, following the arc of the inner wall.

Presently someone knocked on the door overhead. The guards loosened their guns and looked up. Fumbling sounds, and then the door dropped open and a man backed slowly down the ladder. He balanced a tray in one hand. He did not try to close the door after him.

The slowboat had never been a convenient place to work. Ladders everywhere. The man with the tray had to back a long way down, the full length of what had been a large, comfortable living room, before he touched bottom . . . .

Matt poked his head through the doorway, upside down.

There was the lab man, backing down the ladder with his coffee tray balanced on one hand. On the floor were three more men, and one was Castro. As Matt's head appeared in the doorway each pair of eyes glanced up, held Matt's stare for a moment, then dropped.

Matt started down, looking over his shoulder, trying to hold eight eyes at once.

## XXIV

“Dammit, Hood, help me up.”  
“Parlette, you can't possibly expect —”

“Help me over to the phone.”

“We'd be committing suicide,” said Harry Kane. “What would your army



of relatives do when they learned we were holding you prisoner in your own house?"

"I'm here of my own free will. You know that."

"But will *they* know that?"

"My family will stand behind me." Parlette set the palms of his hands on the chair arms and, with tremendous effort, stood up. But, once up, he was unable to move.

"They won't know what's going on," said Harry Kane. "All they'll know for certain is that you're alone in the house with three escaped vivarium prisoners."

"Kane, they wouldn't understand what's happening if I talked for two hours. But they'll stand behind *me*."

Harry Kane opened his mouth, closed it again, and began to tremble. He had to fold his hands on the table to keep them from shaking. "Call them," he said.

"No," said Jay Hood.

"Help him, Jay."

"No! If he uses that phone to turn us in, he'll go down as the greatest con man in history. And we'll be finished!"

"Oh, phut." Lydia Hancock stood up and wrapped one of Parlette's arms around her neck. "Be sensible, Jay. Parlette is the best chance we ever had. We've *got* to trust him." And she walked him over to the phone.

Almost time to resume the interrogation. Jesus Pietro waited while the lab man deposited his tray on the "coffin" and started back up.

And he realized that his pulse was racing. There was cold perspiration

dribbling wetly down his ribs. His hand throbbed like a heart. His eyes flickered here, there, all about the room, looking for something that wasn't there.

Within seconds, and for no reason at all, the interrogation room had become a trap.

There was a thump, and every muscle in his body jumped. Nothing there, nothing his eyes could find. But he, the nerveless, elephantine Castro, was jumping at shadows. The room was a trap, a trap.

"Back in a moment," said Jesus Pietro. He strode to the ladder, looking every inch the Man in Charge, and went up.

A guard, "But, sir! What about the prisoner?"

"I'll be right back," said the Head, without slowing.

He pulled himself through the doorway, reached down and closed the door. And there he stuck.

He'd had no planned destination. Something had screamed at him to *get out*, some intuition so powerful that he had followed it without question. Right in the middle of an interrogation.

What was he afraid of? Was he about to learn some unpleasant truth from Polly Tournquist? Or was it guilt? Surely he no longer lusted after the colonist girl. Surely he could control it if he did . . . .

No Implementation man had ever seen him thus: shoulders slumped, face set in wrinkles of fatigue, standing in a hallway because he had no place to go.

In any case, he had to go back. Polly Tournquist was waiting for the

sound of his voice. She might or might not know things he needed to know.

He pulled himself together, visibly, and turned to face the door, his eyes sliding automatically around the bright frosted pane in the wall. Men who worked in the slowboats developed such habits. As ceiling lights the panes would have been just bright enough. As wall lights they hurt the eyes.

Castro's eyes slid around the pane, caught something, and came back. There was a blue scrawl on the frosted pane.

**M**att was almost down the ladder when the man in the lab coat started up.

Matt addressed a subvocal comment to the Mist Demons, who made no obvious response. Then, because the lab man was about to bump into him, he swung around to the underside of the ladder and dropped. He landed with a thump. Every head in the room jerked around. Matt backed into a corner, stepping softly.

He'd known it from the beginning: he couldn't count on this power of his. At some point he would have enough of being afraid; the glandular caps over his kidneys would stop producing adrenalin . . . .

The guards turned their eyes back to the ceiling. The lab man disappeared through the doorway and closed the door after him. Only Castro himself continued to behave peculiarly; his eyes kept darting around the room as if searching for something that wasn't there. Matt began to breathe more easily.

The man with the coffee had appeared at just the right time. Matt had been about to leave, to see if he could find a fusion control room before he got back to Castro. He had, in fact, discovered that the frosted glass in the hall light would take ink, and he was marking it to show which door led to Castro, when someone had rounded the corner, carrying coffee.

Castro was still behaving oddly. During the interview in Castro's office, Matt had never ceased to be afraid of him. Yet now he seemed only a nervous man with a bandaged arm.

*Dangerous thinking, thought Matt. Be scared!*

Suddenly Castro started up the ladder.

Matt nibbled his lower lip. Some cosmic chase this was becoming! Where was the Head going now? And how could Matt hold six eyes, two above and four below, while climbing a ladder?

He started for the ladder anyway. "But sir! What about the prisoner?"

"I'll be right back."

Matt backed into the corner again. Prisoner?

Coffin. The word was nearly obsolete on Mount Lookitthat, where crew and colonist alike used their dead. But that box against the wall was easily big enough to hold a prisoner.

He'd have to look inside.

But first, the guards.

**"I**t's the Head calling, Major."  
"Thank you, Miss Lauessen."

"Jansen, is that you, speak up."

"Yes, sir."

"I've found another bleeding heart."

"In the *Planck*?"

"Yes. Right above the coffin room, on a light. Now here's what I want done. I want you to close the *Planck's* airlocks, flood the ship with gas, then come in with a squad. Anyone you can't identify immediately, play a sonic over him to keep him quiet. Got it?"

"Yes sir. Suppose the traitor is someone we know?"

"Use your own judgment there. I have good reason to assume he's not a policeman, though he may be in uniform. How long will you need?"

"About twenty minutes. I could use cars instead of elevators, but it would take just as long."

"Good. Use the cars. Seal off the elevators first. I want as much surprise effect as possible."

"Yes sir."

The guards were no trouble at all. Matt stepped up behind one of the men, pulled the gun from his holster and shot them both.

He kept the gun in his hand. It felt good. He was sick of having to be afraid. It was a situation to drive a man right out of his skull. If he stopped being afraid, even for an instant, he could be killed! But now, at least for the moment, he could stop listening for footsteps, stop trying to look in all directions at once. A sonic stunner was a surer bet than a hypothetical, undependable psi power. It was real, cold and hard in his hand.

The "coffin" was bigger than it had seemed from the doorway. He found clamps, big and easy to operate. The lid was heavy. Foam plastic covered the inside, with a sound-deadening surface of small interlocking conical indentations.

Inside was something packed very carefully in soft, thick white cloth. Its shape was only vaguely human, and its head was not human at all. Matt felt the back hairs stir on his neck. *Coffin*. And the thing inside didn't move. If he had found Polly, then Polly was dead.

He began unwrapping it anyway, starting with what passed for the figure's head. He found ear cups, and underneath, human ears. They were blood-warm to the touch. Matt began to hope.

He unwrapped cloth from a pair of brown eyes. They looked up at him, and then they blinked.

Hoping was over. He had found Polly, and she was alive.

## XXV

She was more cocoon than girl. Toward the end she was helping to get the wrappings and paddings and sensory wires off her legs. She wasn't much help. Her fingers wouldn't work. Muscles jerked rhythmically in her jaw, her arms, her legs. When she tried to step out of the coffin Matt had to catch the full weight of her falling body, and they went down in a heap.

"Thanks," she said unsteadily. "Thanks for getting me out of there."

"That's why I'm here."

"I remember you." She got up,

clinging to his arm for support. She had not yet smiled. When Matt uncovered her mouth and removed the clamps and padding, she had looked like a child expecting to be slapped. She still did. "You're Matt something. Aren't you?"

"Matt Keller. Can you stand by yourself now?"

"Where are we?" She did not let go of his arm.

"In the middle of the Hospital. But we have a fair chance to get out, if you do just as I say."

"How did you get in?"

"Jay Hood tells me I have a kind of psychic invisibility. As long as I can stay scared, I can keep people from seeing me. That's what we have to count on. Hey, are you all right?"

"Since you ask, no." She smiled for the first time, a ghost grin, a rictus that vanished in a split second. She was better off without it.

"You don't look it. Come here, sit down." She was clinging to his upper arm with both hands, as if afraid to fall. He led her to one of the chairs. She's still in shock, he thought. "Better yet, lie down. On the floor. Easy. Now put your feet up on the chair. What the Mist Demons were they doing to you?"

"It's a long story." Her brows puckered, leaving a sudden deep V between her eyes. "I can tell it fast, though. They were doing nothing to me. Nothing and nothing and nothing." She lay on her back with her feet in the air, the way Matt had placed her, and her eyes looked up past the ceiling, looked up at Nothing.

Matt wanted to look away. Polly

was no longer pretty. Her hair was a housecleaners' nest, and her make-up had gone every which way; but that wasn't it. Something had gone out of her, and something else had replaced it. Her pale face mirrored the ultimate horror of what she saw, looking up at Nothing.

Presently she said, "How did you get here, Matt?"

"Came to rescue you."

"You're not a Son of Earth."

"No."

"You could be a ringer. Harry's house was raided the night you came."

"That's highly ungrateful for a maiden in distress."

"I'm sorry." But her eyes were watchful and suspicious. She took her feet off the chair and rolled to sitting position on the floor. She was wearing an unfamiliar garment, like a playsuit, but made of soft, flimsy fabric. Her fingers had found a corner of the cloth and were playing with it, kneading it, pulling at it, rolling it, crumpling it. "I can't trust anything. I'm not even sure I'm not dreaming. Maybe I'm still in the box."

"Easy," he said, and squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. "You'll get over —"

She snatched at his hand to hold it there, so quickly that he almost jerked away. Every move she made was exaggerated. "You don't know what it was like being dead!" She was squeezing his hand, feeling the fingers and the nails and the knuckles, as if she'd never touched a human hand before. "I kept trying to remember things, and they were always just out

of reach. It was —" She stuck, her larynx bobbing and her lips twitching without sound. Then she jumped at him.

She knocked him flat on his back and wrapped herself around him. It was nothing affectionate. She clung to him as if she were drowning and he a floating log. "Hey," said Matt. "The gun. You knocked the gun away."

She didn't hear. Matt looked up at the door. It didn't move, and there were no ominous noises.

"It's all right," he said. "It's okay now. You're out." She had her face buried in the hollow of his shoulder, and she was moving against him. Her arms were tight around his chest with a grip of desperation. "You're out now." He massaged her neck and shoulder muscles, trying to do what Laney had done night before last.

The way she kept touching things, kneading them — he understood now. She was making sure they were real. The time in the "coffin" must have been worse than he could imagine. She must have lost all touch with reality, all her faith in the solidness of things outside that artificial womb. And so she ran her hands along his back, traced the lines of his shoulder-blades and vertabrae with her fingertips; and so she moved against him with a sliding motion, with her toes, her thighs, her arms, her body, as if sensing, sensing with every square inch of skin . . . .

He felt himself coming alive in response. Trap doors and curved metal walls, guns and Implementation police, ceased to matter at all. There was only Polly.

"Help me," she said, her voice muffled.

Matt rolled over onto her. The soft, flimsy-looking fabric of her jumper tore like tissue. Fleetingly, Matt wondered why it was there at all. And that didn't matter either.

Presently Polly said, "Well, I'm real after all."

And Matt, drifting peacefully down from some far peak of Nirvana, asked, "Was that what you meant by help?"

"I didn't know what I meant. I needed *help*." She smiled slowly, with her eyes as well as her mouth. "Suppose it wasn't what I meant. Then what?"

"Then I've callously seduced you." He moved his head back a little to look her in the face. The change was incredible. "I was afraid you'd gone off the beam for good."

"So was I."

Matt glanced up at the trapdoor, then stretched to reach for the sonic.

"You really came to rescue me?"

"Yah." He didn't mention Laney, not yet. No point in spoiling this moment.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. We've still got to get out of here."

"You don't have any questions to ask me?"

What was she doing, testing him? Didn't she trust him now? Well, why should she? "No," he said, "no questions. But there are things I've got to tell you —"

She stiffened. "Matt. *Where are we?*"

"In the Hospital. Deep in the Hospital. But we can get out."

She rolled away and came to her feet in one smooth motion. "We're in one of the slowboats! Which one?"

"The *Planck*. Does it matter?"

She scooped the other guard's sonic stunner from his holster in what looked like a racing dive. "We can set off the fusion plant! Blow the Hospital and the crew into the void mist! Come on, Matt, let's get moving. Are there guards in the corridor? How many?"

"Set off — Are you out of your mind?"

"We'd wipe out the Hospital and most of Alpha Plateau." She picked up her ripped mock-playsuit and threw it down again. "I'll have to pants one of these police. And that'll be *it!* We'll win, Matt! All in one stroke!"

"What win? We'll be *dead!*"

She stood up with her hands on her hips and regarded him with disgust. Now she wore a pair of Implementation uniform pants, too big for her. Matt had never seen anyone more thoroughly alive. "I'd forgotten. You aren't a Son of Earth. All right, Matt, see how far you can get. You may be able to get out of range of the blast. Personally, I doubt it."

"I've got a personal interest in you. I didn't come all this way to have you commit suicide. You're coming with me."

Polly donned a guard's shirt, then hurriedly rolled up the pants, which were much too long. "You've done your duty. I'm not ungrateful, Matt, but we just aren't going in the same direction. Our motives aren't the same." She kissed him hard, pushed

him back and whispered, "I can't pass up this chance." She started for the ladder.

Matt blocked her way. "You haven't a prayer of getting anywhere without me. You're coming with me, and we're leaving the Hospital, if we get that far."

Polly hit him.

She struck him with stiffened fingertips just under the sternum, where the ribs make an inverted V. He doubled up, trying to curl around the pain, not yet trying to breathe, but gaping like a fish. He felt fingers at his throat, and realized that she'd seen the gas filter and was taking it.

He saw her as a blur at the corner of his eye, climbing the ladder. He heard the door open and, a moment later close. Slow fire was spreading through his lungs. He tried to draw air, and it hurt.

He'd never learned to fight. "The luck of Matt Keller" had made it unnecessary. Once he'd struck a guard on the point of the jaw. Where else would you hit somebody? And who'd guess that a lightly built girl could hit so hard?

Inch by inch he uncurled, straightened up. He drew his breath in shallow, painful sips. When the pain over his heart would let him move again, he started up the ladder.

## XXVI

Polly moved at a gliding run. The gas filter was in place over her nose. She held the sonic straight out ahead of her, pointed around the curve of the inner hull. If an enemy appeared, that was where he would

be, right in the gunsight. Nobody would come at her from behind. She was moving too fast.

As one of the inner core of the Sons of Earth, Polly knew the *Planck* as well as she knew her own home. The flight control room was a diameter's distance from the airlock. She ticked off the doors as she passed under them. Hydroponics . . . Library . . .

Flight control. The door was closed. No ladder.

Polly crouched and sprang. She caught the handle at the top of her leap. The door was not locked; it was closed, because nobody ever used the flight control room. Unfortunately the door opened inward, upward. She dropped back, frustrated, landing silently on her toes.

If she'd chosen the fusion room . . . but the fusion room was for fine control. There, the Hospital electricians kept power running to the colonist regions. She'd have run into people, and they might have stopped her.

The guard had carried a wallet.

She leapt again, caught the knob and turned it, pushed the wallet between the door and the jamb, where the catch of the lock ought to be. Again she dropped, and again she leapt. This time she slapped the flat of her hand hard against the door. It flipped upward . . . and over.

Far down the curve of the corridor, someone yelled, "What's going on down there?"

Polly's chest heaved, pulling deep lungfulls of air through her nose, under perfect control. She jumped a last time, caught the jamb and pulled

herself up. Heavy footsteps . . . Before someone could come into sight she had closed the door.

There was a ladder here, built into what had been the ceiling. Doubtless the *Planck's* original crew had used it to climb down from those six control chairs after the First Landing. Polly used it now.

She squirmed into the second seat on the left and found the control panel, and the bypass. Part of the wall had been pried up, and a simple iron bar had been welded into place between two plates, removing control from the flight control room and giving it directly to the fusion room. In flight both control points had been necessary: the fusion room to keep the drive working and stable, and the flight control room to keep it pointed. Now the fusion drive was used only for making electricity, and Polly's control panel was dead.

She went down the ladder, fast. There was a tool closet by the door. If it held a welding arc —

It did.

And if there was no anesthetic gas around — or if it wasn't inflammable —

Nothing exploded as she turned on the welder. She began welding the door shut.

Almost immediately she attracted attention. She could hear excited voices, muffled by the door. Then there was a faint numbness of a sonic beamer. The door didn't conduct subsonics well: but she couldn't take it for long. Nonetheless she finished the welding job before she went back up the ladder.

She used the welding arc to cut

away the bypass. It was slow work. Implementation would surely have barged in on her before she finished. Now, they could whistle for entrance. She had all the time in the world. In their world.

**M**att reached the corridor and began to walk, leaving the interrogation room open behind him. He walked bent, with his chest half collapsed and his arms folded over the pain. He'd forgotten to take the remaining sonic.

"I'm not the domineering type," he muttered, perversely enjoying the sound of his own voice. And, "Either that, or I'm trying to dominate the wrong women."

A heavy figure came pounding around the curve. Jesus Pietro Castro, wearing a gas filter and carrying a heavy mercury-sliver gun, looked up in time to avoid a collision. He jerked to a stop, and then his mouth dropped open as he took in blue eyes, blond hair, a bitter and angry colonist's face, an ear with a small piece bitten out of it and blood soaked into the collar of a crewish overjacket.

"You agree?" Matt said brightly.

Castro raised the gun. The "luck" was off.

And all the rage and humiliation in Matt broke loose. "All right," he yelled, "look at me! Damn you, look at me! I'm Matthew Keller!"

The Head stared. He did not fire. He stared.

"I crashed my way into your crummy Hospital, single-handed, twice! I came through walls and void mist and sleepy gas and mercy bullets to rescue that damn woman, and when

I got her loose she punched me in the gut and folded me up like a flower! So go ahead and look!"

Castro looked and looked.

And finally Matt realized that he should have fired.

Castro swiveled his head from side to side, in a negative motion. But his eyes never left Matt. And slowly, slowly, as if he were knee deep in hardening cement, he moved one slow step forward.

Abruptly Matt realized what was happening. "Don't look away," he said hastily. "Look at me." The Head was close enough now, and Matt reached out and pushed the barrel of the mercy-gun aside, still striving to hold Castro's eyes. "Keep looking."

They stared eye to eye. Above his bulky false nose, Castro's eyes were remarkable: all white and black, all whites and huge expanded pupils, with practically no iris showing. His jaw hung loose under the snowy handle-bar moustache. He was melting. The perspiration ran in slow streams into his collar. Like a man in an ecstasy of fear, or awe, or worship . . . he stared.

Contract the pupils of eyes not your own, and you got psychic invisibility. Expand them, and you got . . . what? Fascination?

For damn sure, he had the Head's complete attention. Matt drew back his fist, cocked it — and couldn't follow through. It would have been like attacking a cripple. Castro was a cripple; one of his arms was in a sling.

There was shouting from down the corridor, from the direction Polly had taken.



The Head moved another gluey step forward.

Too many enemies, before and behind. Matt slapped the gun out of Castro's hand, then turned and ran.

As he dropped through the door to the coffin room, he saw the Head still looking after him, still held in the strange spell. Then he pushed the door closed above him.

Polly cut the last of the bar away, and the control board came alight. She ran her eyes quickly over the lighted dials, then once more, slowly.

According to the control board, the fusion drive was as cold as Pluto's caves.

Polly whistled between her teeth. It was no malfunction of the board. The several dials checked each other too well. Someone had decided to black out the colony regions.

She couldn't start the drive from here. And she'd never reach the fusion room; she'd locked herself in with a vengeance.

If only this had been the *Arthur Clarke!* Castro would never dare cut power to the crew. The *Clarke's* fusion plant must be going full blast.

Well now, she thought in growing excitement. She slid out onto the ladder. There might be a way to reach the *Clarke* . . . .

Jesus Pietro felt a hand shaking his shoulder. He turned and found Major Jansen. "What is it?"

"We've flooded the *Planck* with gas, sir. Everyone who wasn't warned should be unconscious, unless he's behind doors. I wish there weren't so many filters floating around,

though. Whoever we're after has had too good a chance to pick one up."

"Good," said Jesus Pietro. He couldn't concentrate. He wanted to be alone, to think . . . no, he didn't want to be alone . . . . "Carry on," he said. "Try the coffin room. He may be in there."

"He isn't. Or if he is, there's more than one traitor. Somebody's in the Flight Control Room, welded in. It's a good thing the fusion plant is off."

"Get him out. But try the coffin room, too."

Major Jansen moved off in the direction of all the commotion. Jesus Pietro wondered what he'd find, when he finally looked in the coffin room. Had Keller's ghost really gone in there, or had he faded out while running up the corridor? Jesus Pietro wasn't sure.

But he was sure of the ghost.

He would never in his life forget those eyes. Those binding, blinding, paralyzing eyes. They would haunt him the rest of his life . . . however many minutes that might be. For surely the ghost didn't intend to let him go now.

His handphoned rang. Jesus Pietro picked it off his belt and said, "The Head."

"Sir, we're getting some very strange reports, said the voice of Miss Laussen. "A large number of cars are converging on the Hospital. Someone claiming to represent the Council is accusing you of treason."

"Me? Of treason?"

"Yes, sir." Miss Laussen sounded strange. And she kept calling him Sir.

"What grounds?"

"Shall I find out, sir?"

"Yes. And order them to land outside the defense perimeter. If they don't set patrol cars on them. It's obviously the Sons of Earth." He clicked off and immediately thought, *But where did they all come from? And where did they get the cars?*

And he thought, *Keller?*

His hand phone buzzed.

Miss Laussen's voice had turned plaintive — almost querulous. "Sir, the fleet of cars is led by Millard Parlette. He accuses you of malfeasance and treason, and he orders you to give yourself up for trial."

"He's gone insane." Jesus Pietro tried to think. It was all coming at once. Was this why Keller had appeared to him, shown himself at last? No mysterious symbols, this time; no invisible breaking of fingers. Keller's eyes . . . "Try to land the old man without hurting him. The other cars too. Order them to set their cars on autopilot. Tell them they won't be hurt. Give them one minute, then knock them out with sonics."

"I hesitate to remind you, sir, but Millard Parlette is your superior officer. Will you give yourself up?"

Then Jesus Pietro remembered that Miss Laussen was almost pure crew. Did her veins carry Parlette blood? It was reputedly easy to come by. He said the only thing he could.

"No."

The phone cut off, cut him off from the Hospital switchboard.

He'd gone off half cocked, and he knew it. Somehow Polly's blow in the belly had made him want to die. He'd stumbled out into the corridor to be captured.

Not this time. He scooped up the remaining sonic and started for the ladder. This time he'd know just what he was doing when he went through that door.

But why go through it at all? The thought stopped him at the foot of the ladder. If Polly was going to blow the drive —

No, she'd never get that far. And she'd had all the rescuing she was entitled to. It was time to think about escape. He looked up at the exit — and shivered.

Some escape hatch. The moment he poked his head out there, somebody would shoot at it. He had to see his enemy to use the "luck," and he couldn't see in all directions at once.

Yet this room was no place to stand off a siege. All anyone would have to do would be to fire mercyneedles down toward the floor. If he looked before he fired, the "luck" would get him; but that statement applied to an ordinary sonic stunner. And so he wouldn't look.

He had to get out.

But — Castro's nosepiece. It meant Implementation was using gas. The corridor must be already full of it.

Too many things to think about! Matt cursed and began going through a guard's pockets. The guard stirred and tried to strangle Matt with limp fingers. Matt played the sonic over both guards, then finished his search. Neither guard had a gas filter.

Matt looked up at the door. He could chance it, of course . . . but if there was gas in the corridor, only that airtight door was protecting him now. It had to be airtight, of course.

Get to another room? There were the doors leading to what must be bedrooms. But they were halfway up the halls and too far from the ladder.

And there, just under the exit, was a small door placed where any good apartment would have a coat closet. He might be able to reach it.

## XXVII

It wasn't a coat closet, of course. It held two spacesuits.

And it wasn't easy to reach. Matt had to lean far out from the ladder to turn the knob, let the door fall open, and then jump for the opening. Leaving the cubbyhole would be just as bad, when the time came.

Spacesuits. They had hung on hooks; now they sprawled on the floor like empty men. Thick rubbery fabric, with a heavy metal neck ring set with clamps to hold the separate helmet. Metal struts in the fabric braced the rocket backpack and the control unit under the chin.

Would the air converter still work? Ridiculous, after three hundred years. But there might still be air in the tank. Matt found a knob in the control panel of one suit, twisted it and got a hiss.

So there was still stored air. The suit would protect him against gas. And the big fishbowl of a helmet would not interfere with his vision, nor his "luck."

He snatched up the gun when the door to the corridor dropped open. A long moment later, two legs came into sight on the ladder. Matt played the sonic over them. A man grunted in surprise and toppled into view.

A voice of infinite authority spoke. "You! Come out of there!"

Matt grinned to himself. Quietly he put the gun aside and reached for the suit. A wave of dizziness made the world go dreamy. He'd been right about the gas.

He turned the air knob on full and put his head through the neck ring. He took several deep breaths, then held his breath while he slid feet first into the suit.

"You haven't got a chance! Come on out or we'll come in after you!"

*Do that.* Matt pulled the helmet over his head and resumed breathing. The dizziness was passing, but he had to move carefully. Especially since the suit was a size too small for him.

The door dropped open suddenly, and there was a spattering of mercyslivers. A snarling face and a hand came into view, the hand firing a mercy-gun. Matt shot at the face. The man slumped, head down, but he didn't fall; someone pulled him up out of sight by his ankles.

The air in the suit had a metallic smell thick enough to cut. Matt wrinkled his nose. Anyone else would have been satisfied with one escape from the Hospital. Who but Lucky Matt Keller would have —

There was a roar like a distant, continuous explosion. *What, Matt wondered, are they trying now?*

The ship shook and shook again. Matt found himself bouncing about like a toy in a box. Somehow he managed to brace his feet and shoulders against walls. *I thought the son of a bitch was bluffing!* He snatched at the stunner as it threatened to slide out into space.

The ship jumped, slapping hard against his cheekbone, as one whole wall of the ship ripped away. The roar was suddenly louder, much louder.

“We’re too close,” said Parlette. Hood, in the driver’s seat, said, “We have to be close enough to give orders.”

“Nonsense. You’re afraid someone will call you a coward. Hang back, I tell you. Let my men do the fighting. They know what they’re doing. We’ve practiced enough.”

Hood shrugged and eased back on the 3-4 throttle. Already theirs was the last car in a swarm of more than forty, an armada of floating red tail-lights against the starry night. Each car carried two of Parlette’s line, a driver and a gunman.

Parlette, hovering like a vulture over the car’s phone, suddenly crowded, “I’ve got Deirdre Laussen! All of you be quiet. Listen, Deidre, this is an emergency . . . .”

And the others, Harry Kane and Lydia Hancock and Jay Hood, listened while Parlette talked.

It took him several minutes, but at last he leaned back, smiling with carnivorous white teeth. “I’ve done it. She’ll put our accusation on the intercom. Now we’ll have Implementation fighting each other.”

“You’ll have a tough time justifying that accusation,” Harry Kane warned him.

“Not at all. By the time I finished I could convince Castro himself that he was guilty of treason, malfeasance of duty and augmented incest. Provided —” He paused for effect.

“Provided we can take the Hospital. If I control the Hospital, they’ll believe me. Because I’ll be the only one talking.

“The main point is this. In law I am the man in charge of the Hospital, and have been since Castro was the size of Hood. If it weren’t me it would be some other crew, of course. In practice, it’s Castro’s Hospital, and I have to take it away from him. We have to have control before we can begin changing the government of Mount Lookitthat. But once I’ve got control, I can keep it.”

“Look ahead.”

“Police cars. Not many.”

“Tight formation. I wonder if that’s good? None of us ever had any training in dogfights.”

“Why didn’t you fight each other?”

“We expected to fight,” said Parlette. “We never expected to fight the Hospital. So we —”

“What the Mist Demons is that over there?”

Parlette was leaning far forward in his seat, his mismatched hands bracing him against the dashboard. He didn’t answer.

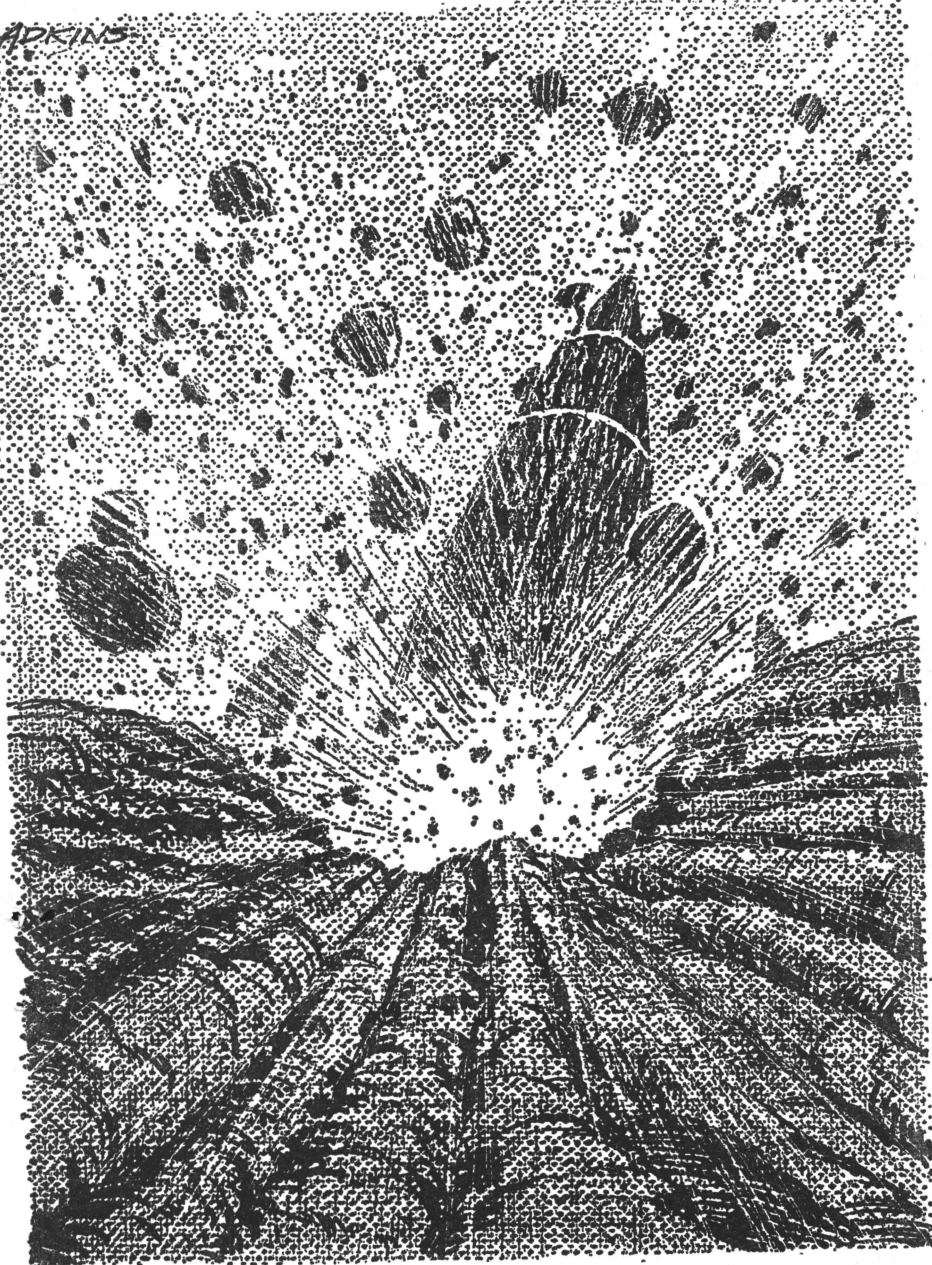
Harry shook his shoulder. “What is it? It looks like fire all around one end of the Hospital.”

Parlette seemed to be paralyzed with shock.

And then one whole end of the Hospital detached itself from the main structure and moved sedately away. Orange flame bloomed all around its base.

“That,” said Millard Parlette, “is the *Planck* taking off on its landing motors.”

ADKINS



Polly was in the upper left hand seat. She manipulated the controls in front of her with extreme delicacy; but still the knobs turned in short jumps. Minute flakes of rust must be coming loose, somewhere in the chain of command which led from this control chair to the fission piles.

Finally the piles were hot.

And Polly tried the water valves.

It seemed to her that long ago, someone had decided to keep the slowboats ready for a fast takeoff. It must have been during the first years of the colony, when nobody, crew or colonist, had been sure that an interstellar colony was possible. Then — others had forgotten, and the only changes made since then had been the necessary ones.

Until the slowboats themselves were part of the structures of the Hospital, and the interiors of the lifesystems were a maze of ladders and jury-rigs. Until the organ banks were moved entirely out of the ships, and the suspended animation rooms were closed off for good. Until the ships were nothing more than electrical generating plants — if one turned a blind eye to the interrogation room, and perhaps to other secrets.

And still the tool closets were undisturbed. And still there were space-suits in the upended rooms, behind doors which hadn't been opened for centuries.

And still there was water in the landing fuel tanks and uranium in the landing motors. Nobody had bothered to remove them. The water had not evaporated, not from tanks made to hold water for thirty years

against interstellar vacuum. The uranium —

Polly valved water into the hot motors, and the ship roared. She yipped in triumph. The ship shuddered and shook along her whole length. From beneath the welded door there were muffled screams.

There was more than one way to tell a joke! The *Planck's* fusion drive was dead, but the *Arthur Clarke's* drive must be running hot. And when Polly dived the *Planck* on it from the edge of atmosphere, the explosion would tear the top from Alpha Plateau!

"Come loose," she whispered.

The *Planck* pulled loose from the rock around it, rose several feet and settled, mushily. The huge ship seemed to be bouncing ponderously on something soft. Polly twisted the water fuel valve to no effect. Water and pile were running at peak.

Polly snarled low in her throat. The pile must be nearly dead: it couldn't even manage to lift the ship against Mount Lookitthat's point eight gee. If it weren't for the landing skirt, guiding the blast for a ground effect, they wouldn't be moving at all!

Polly reached far across to the seat on her right. A bar moved under her hand, and, at the aft end of the *Planck*, two fins moved in response. The ship listed to the side and drifted back to nudge the Hospital, almost gently, once, twice.

Live flame roared through the Hospital. It was water vapor heated beyond incandescence, to the point where oxygen disassociated itself from hydrogen, and it cut where it

hit. Like death's hurricane it roared through the corridors, cutting its way through walls where there were no corridors. It killed men before they knew what was killing them, for the first touch of the superheated steam made them blind.

The drive flame spread its fiery death through a-third of the ground floor.

To men inside and outside the Hospital, to men who had never met and never would, this was the night everything happened at once. Sane men locked their doors and found something to hide under while they waited for things to stop happening.

“Laney. It must be Laney,” said Jay Hood. “She got through.”

“Elaine Mattson?”

“Right. And she got to the *Planck*. Can you imagine?”

“She must have a wonderful sense of timing. Do you know what will happen when she blows the drive?”

“Oh, my god. What'll we do?”

“Keep flying,” said Parlette. “We'd never get out of range now. We might just as well bull through with this, and hope Miss Mattson realizes the colonists are winning.”

“More police cars,” said Harry Kane. “Left and right, both . . . .”

Polly touched the bar again. The ship tilted to the other side and began to drift ponderously away from the Hospital.

She dared tilt the ship no further. How much clearance did she have under the landing skirt? A foot? A yard? Ten? If the skirt touched the ground, the ship would go over on its side.

That was no part of Polly's plan.

Behind her, the door had turned red hot. Polly glanced back with bared teeth. She moved her hands over the board, but in the end left the settings just the way they were. She'd have to circle all the way around the Hospital; but in the end she'd have a gliding run at the *Arthur Clarke*.

And she'd hit it again and again until one ship failed.

She never noticed when the red spot on the door turned white and burned through.

## XXVIII

The ship jumped three feet upward, and Matt's head snapped down against the closet floor. When he looked up, the outer hull side of the room was tearing away, like tissue paper except for the agonized scream of old metal dying. And Matt was looking straight into Castro's office.

He couldn't think; he couldn't move. The scene had a quality of nightmare; it was beyond the rational. *Magic!* he thought; and, *Not again!*

The Hospital was drifting away, dreamlike. His ears had gone dead, so that it all took place in an eerie silence. The ship was taking off . . . .

And there was no air in his helmet. The tank had held only one last wheeze. He was suffocating. He pulled the clamps up with fingers gone limp and tingly, tossed the helmet away and gulped air. Then he remembered the gas.

But it was clean, hot air, air from outside, howling through the gaping hole in the outer hull. He sucked at it, pulling it to him.

The ship was going up and down in a seasick manner. Wavering in the drive, Matt thought and tried to ignore it. But one thing he couldn't ignore.

Polly had reached the controls. Apparently she was taking the ship up. No telling how high they were already; the lights of the Hospital had dwindled to the point where everything outside was uniformly black against the lighted room. They were going up, and the room was wide open to naked space, and Matt had no helmet.

The room seemed steadier. He jumped for the ladder. The suit was awkward, but he caught the ladder and made his way down, fighting the imbalance caused by his backpack. It wasn't until he touched bottom that the backpack caught his conscious attention.

After all, if the *Planck's* landing motors still worked, why not a space-suit's backpack?

He peered down at a control panel meant to be read by fingertips. With the helmet on he couldn't have done it. The backpack was studded with small rocket motors; he wanted the ones on the bottom, of course.

*How high was he now?*

He tried the two buttons on the bottom, and something exploded on his back. It felt about right, as if it were trying to lift him. There was only one throttle knob. Doubtless it controlled all the jets at once, or all that were turned on at a given time.

Well, what else did he need to know? *How high was he?*

He took one last deep breath and went out the hole in the wall.

He saw blackness around him, and he twisted the throttle hard over. It didn't move. It was already on full. Matt had something like one split second to realize that the backpack was for use in space, that it probably wouldn't have lifted its own weight against gravity.

He hit.

Moving carefully so as not to interfere with the men using welding torches, Major Jansen peered up into the hole in the flight control room door.

They had pushed a platform into position under the door, so that two men could work at once. The platform rose and settled, rose and settled, so that the major had to brace himself with his hands flat on the ceiling. He could see raven hair over the top of a control chair, and one slender brown arm hanging down.

Jesus Pietro, standing below, called, "How long?"

"A few seconds," said one of the men with cutting torches. "Unless she welded the hinge side too."

"Do you know where we're going?" called the Head. "I do."

Major Jansen looked down, surprised. The Head sounded so odd! And he looked like an old man in poor health. He seemed unable to concentrate on what was going on. *He's ready for retirement*, Major Jansen thought with compassion. *If we live through this* —

"I do," Jesus Pietro repeated, and nodded to himself.

Major Jansen turned away. He had no time to feel sympathy for the Head, not while this was going on.



"She welded the hinge side," said one of the cutters.

"How long?"

"Three minutes, if we work from both ends."

The ship continued to move, drifting along on its cushion of fire.

Fire swept along the edge of the trapped forest, leaving a line of licking red and orange flame, ignored by the embattled aircars above. Presently there were explosions among the trees, and then the whole tongue of forest was aflame.

Now the *Planck* had left the defense perimeter and moved into a place of shops and houses. The crew who lived in those houses were awake, of course. Nobody could have slept through that continuous roar. Some stayed where they were; some made for the street and tried to run for it. The ones who reached their basements were the ones who lived. A block-wide path of exploded, burning houses was the wake of the *Planck*.

But now the houses were empty, and they didn't burn. They were of architectural coral, and they had been deserted, most of them, for upwards of thirty years . . . .

"We're through, sir." The words were hardly necessary. The cutters were pushing the door aside, their hands protected by thick gloves. Major Jansen shoved through and went up the ladder with panic at his back.

Polly's control board bewildered him. Knowing that he knew as much about flying spacecraft as anyone behind him, he continued to search for the dial or wheel or lever that would



change the *Planck's* direction. Finally, puzzled, he looked up; and that was his undoing.

The flight control room was long. It projected through the cargo section to where the outer and inner hulls met; and most of it was transparent. Major Jansen looked through the outer hull, and he saw what was happening outside.

He saw the glow of the drive flame near the bottom of his view. To the right, a coral house exploding: the last house. Not far ahead, the black line of the void edge, coming closer. And he froze.

"We're going over," said Jesus Pietro, standing under him on the ladder. He showed neither surprise nor fear.

Major Jansen screamed and buried his face in his arms.

Jesus Pietro squeezed past him and into the left-hand seat. His decision was based on logic alone. If Major Jansen had not found the right control, then he was looking at the wrong panel; and this was the only other control panel the colonist girl could reach from where she was sitting. He found the fin controls and tried them.

The ship tilted back and began to slow.

Still slowing, it drifted over the edge.

Jesus Pietro leaned back in his seat and watched. The *Planck* was no longer supported by the ground effect. Jesus Pietro felt a sensation like an elevator starting down. He watched the cliff go by, faster and faster, a black shadow. Presently it was half the sky, and the other half was stars.

Presently the stars went out.

The ship began to grow hot. It was

hot and dark outside, and the ancient walls of the *Planck* creaked and groaned as the pressure rose. Jesus Pietro watched, waiting.

Waiting for Matthew Keller.

## XXIX

He struggled half awake, desperate to escape the terror of sleep. *What a wild nightmare that was!*

Then he felt fingers probing him.

Agony! He braced and tried to draw away, putting his whole body into it. His whole body barely twitched; but he heard himself whimper. A cool hand touched his forehead, and a voice — Laney's? — said, "Lie back, Matt."

He remembered it later, the next time he woke. He woke slowly, this time, with the images of his memory forming around him. Again he thought, *What a nightmare*. But the images came clearer, too clear for a dream, and:

His right leg and most of his right side were as numb as frozen pork. Parts of him were not numb; they ached and stung and throbbed. Again he tried to withdraw from the pain, but this time he was tied down. He opened his eyes to find himself surrounded.

Harry Kane, Mrs. Hancock, Laney and several others he didn't recognize all crowded around his strange bed. One was a big woman with red hands and somewhat crewish features, wearing a white smock. Matt disliked her at once. He'd seen such smocks in the organ banks.

"He's awake." The woman in white spoke with a throaty lilt. Don't

try to move, Keller. You're all splinted up. These people want to talk to you. If you get tired, tell me right away and I'll get them out of here."

"Who are you?"

Harry Kane stepped forward. "She's your doctor, Keller. How do you feel?"

How did he feel? A moment ago he'd realized, too late, that his backpack wouldn't lift him. But he couldn't remember the mile-long fall. "Am I going to die?"

"No, you'll live," said the woman doctor. "You won't even be crippled. The suit must have braced you against the fall. You broke a leg and some ribs, but they'll heal, if you follow orders."

"All right," said Matt. Nothing seemed to matter much. Was he doped? He saw that he was on his back, with one leg in the air and something bulky around his ribcage, interfering with his breathing. "Did they put transplants in me?"

"Never mind that now, Keller. You just rest and get well."

"How's Polly?"

"We couldn't find her."

"She was on the *Planck*. She must have reached the drive controls."

"Oh!" Laney exclaimed. She started to say something, then changed her mind.

Harry said, "The *Planck* went over the edge."

"I see."

"You got her loose?"

"I got her loose once," Matt said. The faces were growing hazy. "She was a fanatic. All of you, fanatics. She had all the rescuing I could give her."

The room drifted away, dreamlike, and he knew the *Planck* was taking off. From a distance a woman's authoritarian crew lilt ordered, "Out, now, all of you."

The doctor escorted them to the door, and Harry Kane put a hand on her elbow and took her with them into the corridor. There he asked, "How long before he's well?"

"Let go of me, Mr. Kane."

Harry did. "How long?"

"Don't worry, he'll be no invalid. In a week we'll put him in a walking cast. In a month, we'll see."

"How long before he's back at work?"

"Two months, with luck. Why so eager, Mr. Kane?"

"Top secret."

The woman scowled. "Whatever you're planning for him, you can bear in mind that he's my patient. He won't be ready for anything else until I tell you so."

"All right. I suggest you don't tell him about the transplants. He wouldn't like that."

"They're in his records. I can't do anything about that. I won't tell him anything."

When she had left them, Laney asked, "Why so eager?"

"I have an idea about Matt. I'll tell you about it later."

"Don't you think we've used him enough?"

"No," said Harry Kane. "I'd like to, but no."

Millard Parlette was near exhaustion. He'd moved into Jesus Pietro Castro's office on Sunday

night, even before the outer wall was replaced, and he'd lived there ever since. His meals were sent in, and he used Castro's cot when he slept, which was rarely. Sometimes it seemed to him that he was at the end of his life; that he'd waited just long enough to meet this, the crisis he'd foreseen a hundred years ago.

The *Planck* had done terrible damage to the Hospital, but the work of rebuilding was well in progress. Parlette had hired a construction firm himself, paying them out of his personal fortune. Eventually he would push a bill through the Council to reimburse him. Now workmen were painting the outer wall of his office, which on Sunday night had been yawning space.

His immediate problem was that at least half of Implementation wanted to quit.

The events of last week had had a disastrous effect on Implementation morale. Having the Head accused of treason, and deposed by force, was only part of it. Elaine Mattson and Matthew Keller had done their part, infiltrating the Hospital with bombs and stealth. The vivarium prisoners had been freed to make slaughter in the Hospital corridors. The destruction of the *Planck* had affected, not just Hospital personnel, but all of Alpha Plateau; for the *Planck* was half of history.

Now Implementation was faced with a dreadful confusion. All raids on the colony plateaus had been canceled. Known rebels moved freely through the Hospital, and none could touch them. Their attitude toward the police was rude and contemptuous.

Rumor had it that Millard Parlette was drafting new laws to further restrict police power. It didn't help that the rumors were true.

Parlette did what he could. He spoke to every man who wanted to resign. Some he persuaded to stay. As the ranks dwindled he found new ways to use the men he had left.

At the same time he was dealing with the Plateau's four power blocs.

The Council of the Crew had followed Parlette in the past. With luck and skill and work he would make them follow him again.

The crew as a whole would normally follow the Council. But a colonist revolt, in these days of a weakened, disheartened Implementation, might send them into a full panic; and then the Council would mean nothing.

The Sons of Earth would follow Harry Kane. But Kane was beyond Parlette's control, and he didn't trust Millard Parlette at all.

The non-rebellious majority of colonists would remain non-rebellious if Kane left them alone. But the Sons of Earth, with their privileged knowledge of the ramrobot gifts, could stir them to killing wrath at any time. Would Harry Kane wait for the New Law?

Four power blocs, and Implementation too. Being Head meant an endless maze of details, minor complaints, delivery of reprimands, paperwork, petty internal politics . . . he could get lost in such a maze, and never know it until a screaming colonist army came to storm the Hospital.

It was a wonder he ever got around to Matt Keller.

**M**att lived on his back, with his right side cased in concrete and his right leg dangling in space. He was given pills which reduced the pains to permanent, aggravating aches.

The woman in the organ bank smock examined him from time to time. Matt suspected she saw him as potential organ bank material, of dubious value. On Wednesday he overheard someone calling her Dr. Bennet. He had never thought of asking her name, as she had never thought of giving it.

In the early morning hours, when the sleeping pills were wearing off, or during afternoon naps, he was plagued by nightmares. Again his elbow smashed a nose across a man's face, and again there was the awful shock of terror and triumph. Again he asked the way to the vivarium, turned and raised his arm to see the skin beaded with bright blood. Again he stood in the organ banks, unable to run, and he woke drenched in perspiration. Or, with a stolen sonic, he dropped uniformed men until the remembered sonic backlash turned his arm to wood. He woke, and his right arm had gone to sleep under him.

He thought of his family with nostalgia. He saw Jeannie and her husband every few months; they lived not twenty miles from Gamma's major mining area. But he hadn't seen his mother and father in years. How good it would be to see them again!

Even the memory of mining worms filled him with nostalgia. They were unpredictable, yes, but compared to Hood or Polly or Laney . . . at least

he could understand mining worms.

His curiosity had been as dead as his right leg. On Wednesday evening it returned with a rush.

Why was the Hospital treating him? If he had been captured, why hadn't he been taken apart already? How had Laney and Kane been allowed to visit him?

He was frantic with impatience. Dr. Bennet didn't appear until noon Thursday. Somewhat to his surprise, she was not at all reluctant to talk.

"I don't understand it myself," she told Matt. "I do know that all the live rebels have been turned loose, and we aren't getting any more organ bank material. Old Parlette's the Head now, and a lot of his relatives are working here too. Pure crew, working in the Hospital."

"It must be strange to you."

"It's weird. Old Parlette is the only one who knows what's really going on — if he does. Does he?"

Does he? Matt groped at the question. "What makes you think I know?"

"He's given orders that you're to be treated with an excess of tender loving care. He must have some reason, Keller."

"I suppose he must."

When it was obvious that that was all he had to say, she said, "If you've got any more questions, you can ask your friends. They'll be here Saturday. There's another weird thing; all the colonists wandering through the Hospital, and we've got orders not to touch them. I hear some of them are proven rebels."

"I'm one myself."

"I thought you might be."

"After my leg heals, will I be turned loose?"

"I suppose so, from the way you're being treated. It's up to Parlette." Her treatment of him had become curiously ambivalent. By turns he was her inferior, confidant and patient. "Why don't you ask your friends on Saturday?"

That night they hooked up a sleepmaker at the head of his bed.

"Why didn't they do that before?" he asked one of the workmen. "It must be safer than pills."

"You're looking at it wrong," the man told him. "Most of the patients here are crew. You don't think a crew would use a vivarium sleepmaker, do you?"

"Too proud, huh?"

"I told you. They're crew."

There was a listening bug in the headset.

### XXX

To Parlette, Matt was part of the paperwork. His was one of the dossiers lying on Jesus Pietro's desk. Its cover was scorched, like the others; but the Head's office, on the second floor, had escaped most of the damage from the *Planck's* wild-fire drive.

Parlette went through all those dossiers, and many more. By now he knew that the worst threat to his "New Law" was defection by the Sons of Earth. Only they, with their presumed control over the colonists, could make it work; and only they were beyond his control.

Matthew Keller's dossier was un-

usual in its skimpiness. There wasn't even a record of his joining the rebel organization. Yet he must belong. Castro's notes implied that Keller had freed the vivarium prisoners. He had been badly hurt invading the Hospital a second time. He must be partly responsible for the *Planck* disaster. He seemed to be connected with the mystery of the bleeding-heart symbol. A very active rebel, Matthew Keller.

Then there was Harry Kane's disproportionate interest in him.

Parlette's first evanescent impulse was to have him die of his injuries. He'd caused too much destruction already. Probably the *Planck's* library could never be replaced . . . . But getting Harry Kane's trust was far more important.

On Thursday Dr. Bennet sent him word that Keller would be receiving visitors. Installing a listening bug was an obvious precaution. Millard Parlette made a note of the coming interview — at Saturday noon — then forgot it until then.

When Hood had finished talking, Matt smiled and said, "I told you they were little hearts and livers."

It didn't go over. The four of them looked solemnly back at him, like a jury circling his hospital bed.

When they'd first come in, he'd wondered if they were all slated for the organ banks. They'd been so deadly serious, and they moved with coordination, as if they'd rehearsed this.

Hood talked for almost half an hour, with occasional interruptions from Harry Kane and no comments at all from Laney and Mrs. Hancock.

It still seemed rehearsed. *You do all the talking, Jay*, someone must have said. *Break it to him gently. Then* — But what they'd told him was all good.

"You've still got that bad-news look," he said. "Why so solemn? All is roses. We're all going to live forever. No more Implementation raids. No more being hauled off to the organ banks without a trial. We can even build wooden houses if we're crazy enough to want them. The millennium has come at last."

Harry Kane spoke. "And what's to keep Parlette from breaking all his rash promises?"

Matt still couldn't see why it should involve him. "You think he might?"

"Look at it logically, Keller. Parlette has Castro's job now. He's the Head. He runs Implementation."

"That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Kane. "I want him to have all the power he can grab, because he's the only man who can put the New Law across — if he chooses. But let's just back off a little and look at how much power he does have.

"He runs Implementation." Kane ticked it off on a finger. "He's trained his own clan to use hunting guns. That gives him most of the weapons on Mount Lookitthat. He can twist the Council around his little finger. Parlette is well on his way to being the world's first emperor!"

"But you could stop him. You said yourself that you can raise the colony against him any time you like."

Kane waved it off. "We can't do that. Sure, it's a good threat, especially after what we've already done

to Implementation. But we don't want a blood bath any more than Parlette does, or says he does. No, we need something else to hold over him."

Four solemn faces waited for his reply. What the Mist Demons was this all about? Matt said, "All right, you thought up the problem, now think up an answer."

"We need an invisible assassin."

Matt raised himself on one shoulder, peered at Harry Kane around the white pillar of his traction-bound leg. No, Kane wasn't joking. The effort was exhausting, and he dropped back.

Laney put a hand on his arm. "It's the only answer, Matt. And it's perfect. No matter how powerful Millard Parlette becomes politically, he'll never have a defense against *you*."

"It's you or civil war," Kane put in.

Matt found his voice. "I don't doubt you're serious," he said wonderingly. "I doubt your sanity. Do I look like an assassin? I've never killed anyone. I never intend to."

"You did pretty well last weekend."

"What —? I used a stun gun! I hit some people with my fist! Why does that make me a pro killer?"

"You realize," said Hood, "that we never intend to use you as such. You're a threat, Matt, nothing more. You'll be one leg in the balance of power between the Sons of Earth and Millard Parlette."

"I'm a miner." Matt gestured with his left arm, the one that didn't pull cracked ribs. "A *miner*. I use trained worms to dig for metal. My boss sells the metal and buys worms and worm food, and with luck he makes enough

to pay my salary. Wait a minute. Have you told Parlette about this idea?"

"No, of course not. He'll never know about it, unless you agree, and then we'll wait until you're out of the Hospital."

"Mist Demons, I should *hope* so. If Parlette gets the idea I'm dangerous to him — and me on my back like this — I want to be on Delta before you tell Parlette. Hell, I want to be on *Earth* before —"

"Then you agree?"

"No, Kane! No, I do not agree to anything! Don't you realize I've got a family? What if Parlette takes hostages?"

"Two parents and a sister," Hood amplified. "Parents on Iota."

"Don't worry," Laney said soothingly. "We'll protect them, Matt. They'll be safe."

Kane nodded. "If anyone so much as harms a hair on your head, or threatens any member of your family, I'll declare total war. I'll have to tell Parlette that, and to make him believe it I'll have to mean it. And I do."

Matt thought very seriously about shouting for Dr. Bennet. It wouldn't work. Even if she threw them out, they'd only come back later.

And Matt Keller was a man on his back. He could move three inches to the side if he were willing to endure the pain. Four inches, no. A captive audience.

"You've really thought it out, haven't you? Why did you wait so long to tell me?"

Jay Hood answered. "I wanted to

be here. And this is my day off."

"You're back teaching school, Jay?"

"It seems appropriate to teach history while we're making it." In the dry voice there was a barely concealed jubilation. Hood was in his element. Strange that he'd never suspected the size of Hood's ego.

"You got me into this," said Matt.

"Sorry. My apologies. Believe me, Matt, I only picked you as a probable recruit." When Matt didn't answer, Hood continued, "But we do need you. Let me show you how much. You were dying, Matt —"

"Stop, Jay."

"He has a right to know, Laney. Matt, those ribs you broke tore up your lung and your diaphragm. Harry had to talk Parlette into —"

"Jay, *shut up*."

"All right, Laney." He sounded hurt.

"Matt, we weren't going to tell you. Really we weren't."

Dead man's flesh was a part of him, forever. Living under his ribcage: a strange, partial resurrection.

Matt said, "All right, Laney. How do you stand on this?"

Laney looked down, then up to meet his eyes. "It's your choice, Matt. But if we don't have you, we don't have anyone." She seemed to stop, then hurried on. "Listen, Matt, you're making a big thing out of this. We're not asking you to rush right out and murder someone. We'd be perfectly happy to see you go back to your mining worms. For all we care, you can stay there the rest of your life, with a small extra income —"

"Thanks."



— for being on standby alert. Maybe Parlette's honest. Maybe he really does want to make the Plateau a paradise. Maybe all is roses. But just in case — ”

She leaned forward in the uncomfortable hospital chair, gripping his wrist with one hand, looking deep into his eyes. Her nails cut the skin. “Just in case Parlette is ambitious. Then, we'll need you to stop him. Nobody else will be able to do it.”

“We must let him have his power now. Somebody has to take power, or there'll be civil war. But if he needs to be stopped, and you don't stop him, you'll be a coward.”

Matt tried to pull his arm away. Torn muscles reacted; it was as if he'd been kicked in the side with a lead boot. “You're fanatics! All four of you!” And he was trapped, trapped

...  
Laney let go. Slowly she sat back, her eyes soft and dreamy, with pinpoint pupils.

Matt relaxed. The others were looking at nothing. Jay Hood was humming under his breath. Mrs. Hancock scowled at some unpleasant thought.

“The luck of Matt Keller” had given him a breathing space.

“The luck of Matt Keller.” A joke, a shaggy dog story. If he hadn't used the power to “rescue” Polly, she might be alive now. If he hadn't come running to Jay Hood for explanations, he'd be back tending his mining worms. No wonder this form of “luck” had never appeared before. Perhaps it never would again.

It was a detrimental mutation. It

had kept him virgin until he was twenty-two. It had killed Polly and caused Laney to see him as a tool instead of a man. It had sent him into the *Planck*; he'd never have tried that without his psychological invisibility. Into the *Planck* to die; out, by blind luck, with a dead man's lung.

A man should have the sense to hide his differences.

Too late. They would forget him, again and again, as often as he desired. But always they would come back. Matt Keller, tool, captive assassin.

Not likely!

“You,” he said. “Mrs. Hancock.”

The others stirred, turned to face him, returned to the world in which Matt Keller was a factor to be considered.

“Mrs. Hancock. Do you have anything to say to me?”

“I don't think so,” said the middle-aged rebel who should have been a shrewish housewife.

“You didn't say a word while the others were browbeating me. Why did you come?”

She shrugged. “Just to see what would happen. Keller, did you ever lose someone you loved?”

“Sure.”

“To the organ banks?”

“My Uncle Matt.”

“I did my damndest to stop you from getting a transplant, Keller. Dr. Bennet says you'd have lived without it, but of course you'd have been a cripple.”

“I'd have been just as glad,” said Matt, though he wasn't sure it was true.

“I wanted to smash the organ

banks the first chance we got. Nobody else seems to feel that way. Maybe nobody else had a husband cut up for the organ banks."

"Make your point."

She shrugged again. "I don't know if you're as important as Harry says. It seems to me nobody could be that important. You got us out of the Hospital, right. Parlette would never have found us otherwise, right. We're grateful, right. But did we have to cut up a man to show how grateful we are? You didn't do *him* any good."

"Well, he's dead, and we can't break up the organ banks yet. But we're trying to change the laws so less people go into them, and then only the ones that deserve it most. If you were any kind of man, you'd be wild to help us. I say it's all you can do for that dead man."

"For sweet charity."

Mrs. Hancock's mouth closed like a trap.

"I'm going to join you," said Matt. "But not for sweet charity. And now I'll give you my reasons."

"Go on," said Harry Kane. He was the only one who didn't show surprise.

"I can't go back to my mining worms. That's absolute. But I'm no hired killer, and that's for sure too. I've never committed murder. I haven't wanted to, not often. If I ever kill a man, I'll want to know just why I'm doing it.

"There's only one way I can be sure I will.

"From now on, the five of us are going to be the leaders of the Sons of Earth." That, he saw, jolted even Harry Kane. "I'll want a hand in all

decisions. I'll want all the information available to anyone of you. What do you say, Harry?"

"Keep talkin'."

Matt's mouth was dry. Harry Kane didn't like this, and Harry Kane was a bad enemy. "The Sons of Earth can't commit murder without my consent, and I won't give it unless I decide murder is necessary. To make that decision, I'd have to know everything, always. One more thing. If I decide one of you is trying to cheat me, I'll kill him, because cheating me of information will be murder."

"What makes you think you can handle that much power, Keller?" Harry's voice was dispassionate, merely interested.

"I have to try," Matt pointed out. "It's my power."

"Fair enough." Harry stood up. "One of us will be here tomorrow, with copies of Parlette's New Law, in full. If we decide to make changes later, we'll let you know."

"Let me know *before* you make the changes."

Kane hesitated, then nodded. They went.

### XXXI

Millard Parlette sighed and turned off the receiver.

*Invisible assassin?*

An odd phrase to come from a practical man like Harry Kane. What could he have meant?

Kane would tell him eventually, of course.

Even then it wouldn't matter. Kane could be trusted now, and that did matter. Now Kane had a hold on

Millard Parlette. Be it real or imaginary, he would use that hold before he started a civil war.

And Millard could concentrate on the man waiting outside. Implementation had selected one of their number to present a set of grievances. The man must be getting angrier and angrier as he waited for the Head's attention.

Parlette used the intercom. "Send him in, Miss Laussen."

"Good."

"Wait. What's his name again?"

"Halley Fox. Corporal."

"Thank you. Would you please send to Gamma and Delta and Iota Plateaus for records on Matthew Keller."

"Done, mine ancestor."

Mist Demons! How had Castro put up with the woman? Parlette smiled. Why not? Let him take care of Implementation and the Council, and Harry Kane would take care of the rest. An invisible assassin had just lifted half the load from his back.

"It'll be one strange balance of power," said Harry Kane. "Parlette's got every weapon on the planet, except for what we've built in our basements. He's got all the electrical and medical facilities, and most of the wealth. And what have we got? Matt Keller."

"And lucky to get him," said Laney.

A red haired girl in an iridescent dress passed them, walking quickly down the corridor. A crew girl, probably visiting a relative. They stopped talking until she had passed. Harry Kane grinned after her, grinned at

her startled expression and at the way she'd quickened her step to leave them behind. They'd all have to get used to this someday; to the sight of colonists in the hallowed corridors of the Hospital.

Jay Hood said, "Well, we've got him, Or has he got us?" He slapped the wall, making gunshot echoes. "Can you imagine what the historians will say? They may never figure it out."

Matt lay on his back and contemplated the ceiling.

He'd made the right decision. He was sure of it. If he had a power, then *someone* had to have a use for it.

He himself had none.

A detrimental mutation is one that prevents the organism from surviving long enough to breed. Matt's only hope of becoming a father lay in suppressing the "luck" entirely, at least in his private life. An invisible man goes nowhere in a civilized society . . . .

Someone entered. Matt's eyes jerked hard over, caught by the iridescent blue of her dress.

"I beg your pardon," she said, and turned to leave. She was tall and slender, and young, with dark red hair curved into impossible contours. Her dress was of a type never seen on Delta Plateau, loose and clinging, and it *glowed*. A face lovely in its strangeness, with flared nostrils and pronounced cheekbones, marked her as pure crew.

"Just a minute," Matt called.

She turned in surprise, not at what he'd said, but at his colonist accent.

Then her back straightened and her chin lifted and her mouth became a hard, angry line. Matt flushed.

And before her eyes could coldly leave him, he thought, *Look at me.*

Her eyes didn't turn. Her chin came down and her face went soft and dreamy.

*Keep your eyes on mine, he thought at her. I fascinate you, right? Right. Keep looking.*

She took a slow step toward him.

Matt dropped the control. She took another step forward, and then she looked horrified. She turned and ran from the room, followed by Matt's pealing laughter.

Detrimental mutation?

Maybe not.

**T**he Outsider ship was a Christmas decoration, a ball of tinsel ribbons looping over and under and around each other, never touching. It was the diameter of New York City, with about the same population, in beings like black cats-o-nine-tails with thickened handles.

Miles ahead at the end of its tethering cables, the fusion drive spread dim light over the ship. The basking ramps cast vacuum-sharp shadows across each other, and in the borderlines between light and shade lay the crew. They lay with their heads in sunlight and their branched tails in shadow, soaking up energy through thermo-electric currents. Fusion radiation sleeted through their bodies, unnoticed. It was a peaceful, lazy time.

Between stars there was little to do.

Until actinic blue flame flashed across their course, throwing high-energy particles and electromagnetic fields about with carefree abandon.

In moments the object was out of sight, even to an Outsider's sensitive eye. But not to the ship's instruments. In an hour the Outsiders had it nailed: position, velocity, mass, design, thrust. It was metal, mechanical, pushed by fusion and fueled by interstellar hydrogen. Not a primitive device, but —

Built by potential customers.

In every arm of the galaxy were Outsiders, using everything from photon sails to reactionless, inertialess drives to push their ships: but always they traveled through Einsteinian space. Hyperdrive was vulgar. The Outsiders never used hyperdrive.

Other species were different. They preferred not to dawdle in space, enjoying the trip, sightseeing, taking their time. Usually they preferred the speedy convenience of the hyperdrive Blind Spot. Hundreds of times over, alien races had bought the secret of the hyperdrive from passing Outsiders.

The trade ship swung easily toward Procyn and the human colony on We Made It, following Interstellar Ramscoop Robot #144. No chance of catching up, not at the customary .01 gee. No hurry. Plenty of time . . .

In two sparks of fusion light, an industrial revolution moved on We Made It.

END





Dear Editor:

The letters from Wayne Spiceland Jr. and Frank Flynn in October *Hue and Cry* made it a special issue for me because of several things: For one, they certainly didn't ignore my letter in the April issue, and if there's anything I can't stand, it's ignorance. (So that's a cliché. I still think it's funny.) For another, both leaped to the defense of Heinlein, who is, in my opinion, one of the best writers now in print. In fact, my 14-year-old startled a teacher three years ago by saying "The best three authors in the English language are Steinbeck, Heinlein and Shakespeare" . . . . and though I'd enlarge the number a bit, I'd certainly include Heinlein.

But I must be one of the worst writers, or my April letter suffered from exegesis (and it was in an issue I missed, so I can't check up).

I still say that science fiction, like ALL stories, must entertain first of all or lose both its old and new . . . audience. This is *not* to say that it cannot carry a message or make the reader think; actually, as an editor I insist that the reader *must* react (think) or the story is a failure. There must always be a partnership between author and reader: the author supplies the story, the

reader supplies the reaction . . . and the author's ability to involve the reader through his special talent is the catalyst that sets off the reaction. All of the books listed by Mr. Flynn are entertaining stories about "real people" even when the people are dogs as in *City*, by Simak, though a couple of them were less entertaining to me than others by the same author.

Heinlein, Blish and Clarke may be, as Mr. Spiceland says, better than ever. They've always been top-notch, and maybe *Moon is a Harsh Mistress* is terrific even if I felt it a bit to professorial for my taste.

But my main complaint is that, for the most part, too much of today's science fiction is not written by such as Heinlein, Blish and Clarke. The paperbacks, particularly, run chiefly to sword-and-sorcery (and I defy you to find one of *those* that would make anyone think) or to blatant space opera. They are, as Judith Merrill said in a recent book review of some specific books, "comic-strip continuity" though she says (to each his own!) that this "is not all a Bad Thing." As for me, comic-strip continuity lost its interest when I was around twelve years old at most.

To change the comparison, we

might consider the technique of the motion picture or TV film. The extras or bit players may not even have a script, usually don't. The director tells them the expression, the action, the reaction he wants. Maybe they move through at once. He calls for cameras. They perform their part, make their impression, and go off without ever knowing the total story. Even the stars, who *do* know the story, do a lot of their action in piece-meal. A fist fight, for instance may have the two actors sling a single punch over and over for the camera. When one is knocked down, the other may be no where near and the one who falls actually is throwing himself backwards . . . over and over until the "take" is good . . . onto a mattress which doesn't show in the scene as finally printed.

The result, maybe gripping and inspiring plenty of feeling and thought, is a compound of the author's ideas, the director's direction, the actor's technique. The miracle is that this fairly mechanical process can become a thing of art. Too many authors depend on these slick mechanics, on technique, and lose involvement and art of storycraft. But some of our *very best* writers sometimes become so involved in the idea (whether mathematical, sociological, or scientific) that they too lose the story, the human element, that draws in the new s-f reader. The addicts (like me and Flynn and Spiceland) may read the story by a favorite author and, even if we don't like it as well as most by that author, forgive the writer, and struggle with the ideas and hope for a better one next time. A Heinlein or a Blish CAN'T write a *poor* book, merely one that we like less than some other that he wrote, and that

we like less because it is less humanly evocative.

But assume the masters never write a poor book, as I assume. Still their books in any one year will be in a sad minority. This past twelve months I have bought perhaps 50 paperbacks (or more). There was no new Heinlein, Blish, Pohl among them. Of the rest, maybe three would attract a reader new to s-f because they had a story and were not verbal comic-strips, space-operas or sword-sorcery fantasies.

The current shorts, novelettes and novels in the leading magazines are far superior to the run-of-the-mill paperbacks. (And local bookstores on my last two or three visits had no hard-backs.)

I still would like some Heinleins like *Door Into Summer*, *Double Star*, *Farnham's Freehold*, *Methuselah's Children*; more Pohls, more Clements, more Clarkes. Maybe the top authors can't turn out a manuscript as fast as the authors of the flood of potboilers, but until the public can get its baptism in the good science-fiction, the said public isn't going to start panting after books in what is a new field to so many.

And why don't I write a good science-fiction book myself? Because I can't write one up to the best of Heinlein or Pohl, that's why. But you asked for it; Mr. Spiceland. Maybe I *will* write one . . . it might be better than a lot of the tripe I've read in the past year. I think I will!! — Alma McCormick, 4558 Boswell Road NW (EZ), Atlanta Georgia 30305.

● And *when* that great sf story rolls from your typewriter, don't forget to send it along to IF. We're always looking for promising writers — in fact, we publish one new writer every month. — Editor

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