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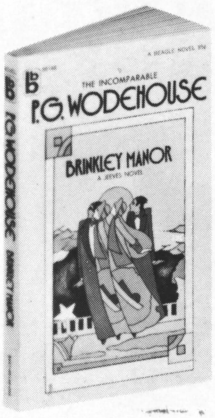

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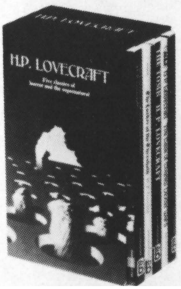

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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

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SHORT STORIES

FEATURES

Cover by GAUGHAN, suggested by TIME OF THE SENDING

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Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

THE temptation to do a sequel to a novel that has proven popular must be irresistible to most writers. Much of the hard work of creating has already been done. The background has been built, the characters are already established and all the writer has to figure out is what trouble he can conjure up for the next go-round—not too difficult a task if he can find a new villain or calamity to launch matters.

Besides, the readers liked the original, so they are all prepared to like more of the same. Look at the series of novels by Smith, Asimov and all the rest.

The trouble with the whole concept is it only seems simple. A sequel necessarily must be better than the first novel if it is to have equal appeal to readers. The background is as familiar to them as to the writer—now they want something more. A reshaping of the same elements won't do.

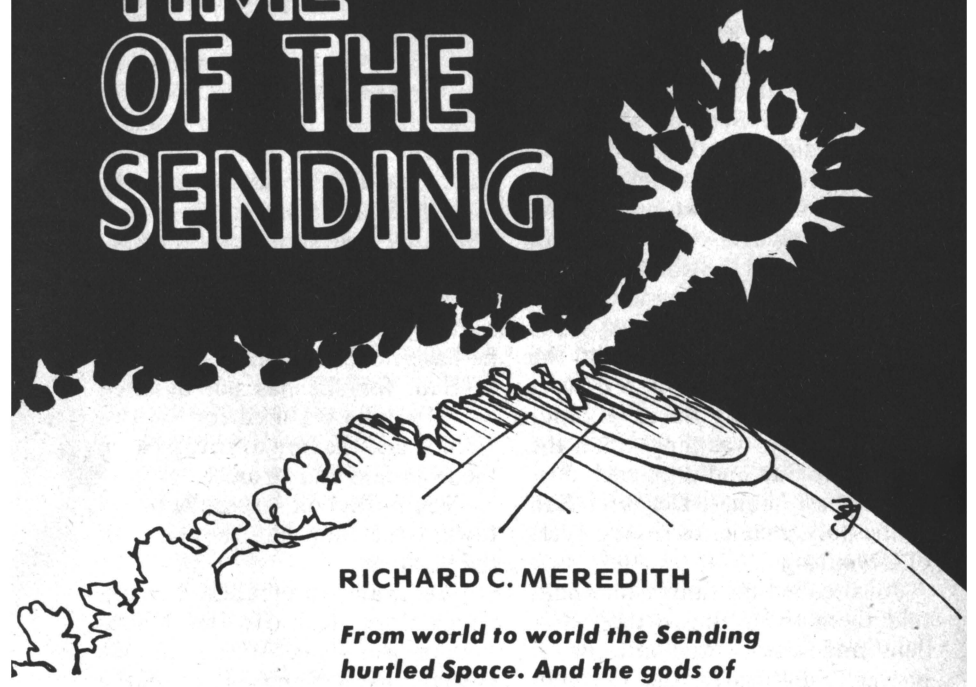
For the writer the trap is he has already done so much thinking about his particular gestalt that going on is something like leaping from trig to calculus—the mind hates to start over with more axioms and reexamine the purposes of earlier thought. Most characters are not simply thought out—they develop under the strain of working, during the plotting and the writing. They come out of one continuous mood at the time and to pick them up again means dissecting old friends as if they

(Please turn to page 170)

I

ON THE morning the famly-kow died Joval was forced to bury the better part of the trade goods in the soft, dry earth. He covered the spot with a pile of stones, both for later identification and to prevent disturbance by the roving packs of wildogs and B-cats that had already begun to come out of their lairs. The food and water supplies and the remainder of the trade goods, these mostly seeds, he distributed between himself and Amalthea. He did not ask Filis to take on any of the burden since she had the responsibility of looking

TIME OF THE SENDING



RICHARD C. MEREDITH

From world to world the Sending hurtled Space. And the gods of Space judged—one way or another

after Masal and she could hardly chase after a thirty-two-year-old boy loaded down with half a hundred kilos of pottery. Then they pushed on, for the Sending was to begin in only two days, and Joval Sona Ramon had never missed a Sending in his adult life.

With the daytime temperatures now down to around 40° the family of Joval Sona Ramon—or at least that portion of his family that was attending this Sending—was able to make good time, even without the famlykow. Summer was quickly passing and the more bearable temperatures of early autumn made the trip almost pleasant,

though Joval had the heretical thought that it would be easier if the Sending did not take place until midwinter when the temperatures averaged a more comfortable 25° C. But he quickly cut off that line of thought. The Sending was when the Sending should be and men did what they had to do. Such was the nature of the world.

At midday the two-angular-degree-wide reddish-orange disk of Sun approached the time of the Devouring. There, hanging in the sky, forever motionless, slightly south and west of the zenith, was the huge, mottled gray-green-blue-banded ball of Big Basta. It dominated the sky, was three times the size of the Sun and once each day, shortly past noon, it Devoured Sun in the holy, magic, terrifying cycle of Devouring.

Joval called his family to a halt, told them to lay down their burdens and assume the attitude of prayer. Sun neared the skymonster, seemed to hesitate for a moment, as if fearful of the faithfulness of her children, then began to vanish into the maw of Big Basta. In a few moments the Woman-of-the-Sky was gone, Devoured, and the sky became totally dark, darker than ever at night, and there was a sudden coldness in the thin air. Star, Sun's tiny daughter, was visible, a tiny blue-white disk just above the northern horizon this time of year, as were the hundreds of smaller stars and the vague band of the Milky Way stretching across the western horizon.

JOVAL SONA RAMON prayed, as he had prayed each day of his life, for the return of Mother Sun. The Man-of-the-Sky, great, ugly Big Basta who stood at the center of the universe, must have heard his prayers and the prayers of all men, for he showed sympathy and soon released Sun. The sky grew bright again.

"Praise be to Big Basta," Joval said in the sing-song of ritual, "for he has released our Sun. Praise be to Sun, for she has not deserted us." Then he gestured for the two women and the boy to rise, pick up their burdens and go on.

They moved on across the plains toward the Ship and the Time of the Sending.

The man who called himself Joval Sona Ramon, the Knife-maker, grandson of the famous Geriat Jason Sona Max, of the Greatfamly Heath, was a little over medium height, heavy, stocky, muscular, with faint traces of gray in his thick black hair. His skin was dark and leathery, despite the seclusion of the past summer, burned brown by the harsh ultraviolet light of Sun through the thin atmosphere. Surrounding the nipples of his chest, half hidden by the dark, curling hair, running in two intricate, blazing lines down his muscular abdomen, across his hips and curving down the insides of his

thighs to his ankles, were the bright red and gold tattoos of manhood, the once painful momentos of his acquisition of the status of a full adult, a free citizen and private priest of the gods of men. On his left shoulder was a stylized *H*, the symbol of the Greatfamly Heath. He was naked, wearing only sandals on his feet and a wide leather belt around his waist, from which was suspended a large, heavy knife of his own manufacture and the purse that contained his flint and steel and tinder for fire building. On his back were his pack of trade goods and a large skin of water.

Amalthea Dauta Suzan, his eldest wife, but twelve short years his junior, was as dark as he. She was a woman who had held much of the attractive looks of her youth—dark, deep, sensual eyes above a finely chiseled nose; full, smiling lips covering her remaining teeth; large breasts only now beginning to loose their fullness and slip downward; a waist only slightly thicker than it had been when Joval took her to be his wife; thighs still smooth and firm. All this was despite the bearing of children, the tilling of the fields, the harvesting, the long, hot summers deep beneath the earth in the burrows carved from the rock and soil. She carried on her body the intricate, delicate yellow and blue floral tattoos of a woman, etched across her breasts and down her body. Four green stars embellished her breasts, two above each nipple, one for the birth of each child who had lived past two seven-days. The stylized D on her left shoulder symbolized the Greatfamly Dunagan, of which she had been a member before her marriage to Joval.

THE youngest wife of Joval's three, auburn-haired Filis Dauta Julianna, born of the Greatfamly Dunagan, a distant cousin of Amalthea, was but eighty years old. The bloom of youth was still on her cheeks, though they were Sunburned dark, and her body was lush and full and had not yet borne a child. Her tattoos, blue and yellow, as involved and delicate as Amalthea's, were still almost fresh upon her body, having been there less than sixteen years and, of course, showed no hint of green. She had cost Joval three famlykows, but she was worth them and more. She would bring him fine sons.

Of his sons only the eldest, Masal, came with them. He had the dark hair and dark eyes and full lips of his mother Amalthea and the distended belly of all children. He was holding Filis' hand, excited at being allowed to attend his first Sending, though he would not be permitted to enter the Ship itself. He would have to reach twice his age, a full sixty or sixty-five years —when the stubble would appear on his chin and the hair of his armpits and pubes would begin to

grow dark and thick like his father's, when he would have been circumcised and, the gods willing, the wound would have healed—before he would be allowed to enter that most holy of places. But for now just seeing the Ship would be enough for the child.

So these four went to this Sending, and all were dark-skinned and naked in the brightness of orange Sun, though in the packs they carried were robes and blankets to keep out the cold of night when they stopped to sleep. And all carried the parasites of men—lice, or things called lice, each with twelve legs and double blood-sucking mouths, moving among the head and body hairs of their hosts, drawing sustenance from the bodies of the unconcerned humans who carried them.

The family of Joval Sona Ramon moved on and the barren plains before them seemed endless.

Above, the sky was blue, a faint, thin, fragile blue with a touch of purple. In it were a handful of circling creatures that men called bats and very few clouds as yet, though later, when it grew a bit cooler, the clouds would come. With them would come the rains and the plants would begin to grow again. That would be after the Sending, when Joval was again on his farm and could cultivate the fields and wait while the rains fell and the crops at last came bursting from the seeds that Joval and Peak and Joval's wives would put into the soil. The red and yellow crops would be of a dozen kinds of vegetables, threshen and potluk and nearbens and the three or four kinds of green plants that still grew on Thisda. In a way, Joval would be very glad to get back home, though he told himself that he would not miss the Holy Sending for a whole winter's crop. He wasn't sure that he meant it; he only hoped that he did.

BEFORE them the plains sloped downward for a long distance, almost soft and gentle in their rolling, though now the colors of the plains were only the browns and ochers of summers, the dry, barren deserts of summer. Later, when the late autumn rains came, the undulating plains would flower, red and yellow and golden and purple, grasses and vines and bushes and the fifty-meter-tall pithy reeds that Joval and his fellows called trees. Then the wild, diminutive, burrow-dwelling creatures of the plains, mutated descendants of the animals brought by the Ancients, wildogs and B-cats and great wildkows and half a dozen others, the native arthropods of Thisda, ten-legged spiders and six-legged scorpions, all would come out of their summer hibernations. They would come to the flowering surface to live and eat and mate and gestate and give birth and kill and die among the plants that enveloped

the plains during the brief, glorious winter.

But that was still several seven-days away and now the plains wore but the brown scorched nakedness of summer. Even Joval, who had lived all his days on the plains of Thisda, whose father and grandfathers and great-grandfathers as far back as men recorded had also lived there, could see no beauty in them. But that was the way things were on Thisda and all a man could do was accept it. Such were his burdens.

On they pushed across the plains, seven kilometers from the Devouring of Sun to the fall of night. Then, with the coming of darkness and its sudden cold, Joval ordered his family to stop. They put down their burdens, opened their packs to remove blankets and built a fire from the patties of dried famlykow dung that Joval carried in the bottom of his pack.

Once the fire was burning well, Joval unstoppered his water skin, carefully feeling the weight of it in his hands. Water enough for the four of them for a seven-day and a half, almost enough to get them back home if they were careful. Though, if necessary, they could barter for water at the Trading that followed the Sending; if worse came to worst they could even drink the urine that Amalthea carried in her own water skin. Joval had drunk unprocessed urine before many times in the summer when water was so scarce and death near. It was water and could be drunk if necessary, though he would much prefer the crude processing that removed most of the body wastes suspended within it. Still, water was no problem—and there *would* be wine to drink on the Night Before the Sending.

AMALTHEA, kneeling on the dry ground, careful of the open, festering sore on her leg that seemingly would never heal, handed Joval the gourd that she carried suspended around her neck on a leather thong. Joval carefully poured it half full of the fresh, warm water. Amalthea, as the eldest wife and bearer of the first son of Joval Sona Ramon, drank first; then came Filis, then Masal, and Joval last, he being the strongest and least needful of water, according to tradition at least.

Soon Amalthea opened the wrapped packets of famlydog meat, brushed away the gnats and midges that seemed to appear out of nowhere, broke off four large chunks and passed them around. While Joval began to eat she offered each of them a handful of treshen seeds, large and moist and still warm from the heat of her body.

Brief prayers were spoken to the principal gods and to the ghosts of the Others, thanks for their survival through another day and re-

quests for the day to come. Joval's sweeping hand sprinkled drops of water around their camp, an offering, a libation to the dry earth gods. Then the blankets were unrolled and preparations made to sleep.

Young Masal slept wrapped in a blanket with his father's youngest wife, sharing the warmth and unwashed odors of their bodies, while Joval and Amalthea wrapped a single large, rough blanket around themselves.

For a few moment's Joval's hands played across the familiar body of his eldest wife, finding in the swellings and depressions, the dry skin and moist recesses a comfort, a warm and living closeness, a welcoming, beckoning softness. But that was all. This night he did not need to possess her fully—fatigue, perhaps, or excitement about the coming Sending; what it was he did not know. He kissed her once on the lips and let it go at that. In moments Amalthea's breasts rose and fell with the calm regularity of sleep.

JOVAL SONA RAMON was nearly one hundred and twenty years old, as he reckoned time, and at that he was still a fairly young man. During that time he had attended twenty-two Sendings and had been within the Ship fourteen times. The Sending that began the day after tomorrow would be no different, except that he was taking his eldest son with him for the first time. Then, he asked himself, why should he feel different about this one? He lay looking up at the huge, unmoving crescent of Big Basta, that was swelling and growing brighter even as he watched, wondering at the cause of his uneasiness.

He visualized the place of the Sending, the great, tarnished, broken shape of the Ship, lying half into the canyon with a gaping tear in its side. The Ship, so the Geriats said, had brought men to Thisda so long ago that the memory of that day was no more than legend and men could not count back that far. And it was to the Ship that they went, all of the men of Thisda, once every four years, to the great control panels on the bridge, to the subspace radio—where one of their number, the selected Radioman, would touch the controls, and would, for a day, Send. And for another day the Radioman would attempt to Receive, though in all the time that men had been on Thisda, no Radioman had ever been successful at Receiving.

Joval told himself, *Perhaps that is why I feel strange. Perhaps this Sending will also be a Receiving.*

Perhaps his old enemy, Theo Sona Weyam, whom Joval had nearly killed so long before, but who had survived to become the Radioman of this Sending—perhaps Theo had studied the Manuals

well enough to understand the holy mysteries of Receiving. Perhaps he would hear word from the Men of Earth.

Perhaps it will all be over soon, and they *will come to take us to Paradise.*

But he did not really think it likely. Perhaps there was even no such place as Earth. Perhaps . . .

He drew himself close to the warmth of Amalthea and scratched idly at the prickling claws of the parasites that crawled across his abdomen. After a time he slept.

II

DAWN came with breathtaking suddenness, as it always did on Thisda, and Joval roused his family. After prayers and a breakfast of famlydog and treshen, with morning urination into Amalthea's leathern pouch and a sprinkling of precious water for the ever-thirsty gods, they started on their way again.

"We shall see the Ship by the Devouring," he told Amalthea during a mid-morning pause, scanning the brown plains and rolling hills and dark horizon before them.

She nodded, brushing the long, dark hair out of her eyes, and smiled at him without speaking. She had accompanied Joval on fully half of his trips to the Sending and it was not necessary for him to tell her such things. She knew them.

Joval smiled back at her, one of his brief, rare smiles, thankful that he and not Theo Sona Weyam of the Greatfamly Innman had won the right to purchase her from her father. Then he urged Filis and Masal on, for it is not proper that a man and his family be late for the Sending.

Sun was nearing Big Basta when they topped the rise and Joval pointed toward the distant valley, the great sweeping depression in the plains and the metallic glint that was the Ship.

"There, you see," he said. "We shall be there before night."

Shielding his eyes from the light of Sun, Joval peered at the Ship, or rather at the valley west of the canyon. He tried to make out the tiny dark specks that would be the campsites of the others and the larger speck that would be the tent of the Geriats, the old men who passed for political and religious leaders of the men of Thisda. He did see the tent and perhaps a camp or two, though at this distance he could not be sure. Soon they would be closer and he could see.

HE DID not look beyond the Ship at the strange, alien place which men held to be taboo and feared to approach closely.

South of the Ship and the Place of the Sending, straddling the great fissure in the earth, were the dark, ghost-inhabited ruins of the Others, the remains of a city that

had been millennia old when the Ancients came crashing down from the sky. Beings other than men had dwelt there in the infinite ages of darkness, before the reckoning of time, beings who had come and built a great civilization and died in some cosmic cataclysm—died when Star came sweeping down out of the sky, burning blue-white, and altered the universe, so the Ancients had believed. Now only the ruins and the ghosts remained of the Others, the original inhabitants, and men feared the place of their dwelling.

Joval and his family had started down the long, sloping hill into the valley of the Ship, almost within hearing range of the barking famlydogs that clustered in the valley, when the Devouring came upon them. They stopped and assumed the attitudes of prayer until Sun returned to them.

Then they went on again.

"GREETING, Joval Sona Ramon," said Robt Sona Dave, the Chief Geriat, when Joval and his family stopped before the tent of the Geriats to pay their respects before finding their own camp site.

Robt, Geriat of the Greatfamly Clegg, was not merely old, Joval thought, but ancient—over two hundred and fifty years, as time was counted on Thisda. He had been a big man in his youth and part of his largeness was still with him, though now his leathery skin hung in loose, ragged folds down his body; his single remaining eye was watery and growing dim, the other an empty, gaping hole. But he was the Chief Geriat—and once every four years the Captain—still a man of great power. Like Joval, he was naked save for his wide knife belt and a coppery medallion that hung around his neck, his symbol of authority, and the staff he used to support his weight. In the center of his shrunken, withered chest was the black tattoo of a cross, the sacred symbol of Geriahood. His had a small circle around the intersection of the arms of the cross, another indication of his status. No other living man on Thisda wore the circled cross of the Chief Geriat.

"Greeting, Robt Sona Dave," Joval said, tipping his body forward slightly. "Praise the Greatfamly Glegg. Good Sending to you."

"Good Receiving to you," old Robt answered ritualistically. "I hope that your trip to the Valley of the Ship was a pleasant one."

"Fair enough," Joval answered, remembering the sudden illness and death of the single famlykow he had brought.

"I see that you are carrying your own burdens," Robt said, as if reading Joval's thoughts. "Have your famlykows had illness?"

"Only one," Joval answered.

"The one that carried our goods. It died suddenly yesterday morning of the redear and we were forced to carry our trade goods on ourselves."

"All of them?" the old Chief Geriat asked, twitching away a multi-winged insect that attempted to settle in the moist socket of his vacant eye.

"Oh, no. Not all. Some we had to leave behind. Amalthea's pottery and most of my knives."

"That is unfortunate, Joval," Robt said, "but perhaps you can persuade some men to go back with you to get them before the Trading begins."

"I had hoped to ask, if there is time."

"Consider that you have asked. I will recommend it."

"Thank you, Geriat."

"Make your camp, then, Joval, for the night comes quickly and the wine traders will soon make their rounds."

Joval nodded. "I will."

"May Sun shine on you for all of your days," Robt Sona Dave said solemnly in parting.

"And may the Men of Earth come before you die, old one," completed Joval.

The old man smiled a lascivious, toothless smile as he started to turn away. "And keep a close watch on young Filis," he said. "Many men will be after her once they have begun to drink the northern wine."

"I will, Geriat," Joval answered and led his family away from the tent toward the area of the camps.

AS SUN vanished below the near horizon and the light of the evening crescent of Big Basta began to illuminate the Valley of the Ship with its cold, polarized light, Joval and his family stood a few hundred meters from the gaping canyon that sundered the valley, looking up at the great metallic cylinder that the stories said had carried their ancestors across the gulfs between the stars.

The Ship was ancient now, tarnished and battered by the countless winter storms that had broken across it and by the unbearable blazing of summer Sun. It lay half on its side, partially in the bottomless crevasse, split in the middle and broken, appearing to be on the verge of falling into the blackness below. But it would not fall, Joval knew, for it had lain thus for more years than he could count and had not fallen. It would probably lie in the same fashion long after Joval Sona Ramon and his family were put into the dark, dry soil of Thisda.

Even after all these years, all these centuries, Joval could see the path that the Ship had taken when it landed and the path it had followed after touching down—and where it had been dragged, for now it did not lie in the spot where it had first come down. With his eyes Joval followed those paths.

Back up the valley, was the first depression, where the crippled Ship had come down from the sky. It had touched and skidded and tried to stop, but had been unable. It had skidded across the valley for two or three kilometers toward the canyon and the blackness deep within it. And as it skidded, it had turned half around, so that its side was parallel with the canyon. The great skid marks were still visible across the stones; the ages had not yet obliterated them. And finally, using the last of the fire that had moved the Ship of the Ancients across the spaces between the stars, it had halted its skid, no more than meters from the yawning edge of the gorge.

Only the benign will of the gods had saved the Ancients, had allowed them to come out of the Ship alive and look down into the canyon into which they and the Ship had nearly fallen.

And that was the time of the first Sending, so the stories went. The Ancients had Sent and then tried to Receive, but now the gods did not look upon them with their former favor. Earth did not reply to this first of the long, long Sendings.

JOVAL looked at the huge bulk of the Ship, half turned, half fallen into the canyon, at the tarnished battered surface and at the still-bright strips that ran along what had once been the top side of the Ship—the bright cross called the *subspace antenna.* One band of bright, glittering metal, a full meter wide, ran from a few meters behind the nose to within the same distance of the Ship's open tail. A second strip, also a meter wide, ran from midway on the right side, up over the top, crossing the first strip, and down to midway on the left side. A third strip, no more than half a meter wide, formed a circle five meters in diameter around the intersection of the two straight bands. This was the antenna, so the stories said, that Sent the subspace messages into the sky—and this was why the Ancients had tried to move the Ship, though no man living today understood why. It was just so.

How it had ever been possible to move the Ship, Joval did not know. The Ship was enormous, a good three hundred meters long, seventy-five meters in diameter at its thickest point and its sheer weight was impossible to guess. But the Ancients had been different from the men who lived today; they had had great beasts of burden called *tractors* and *copters* that men of today did not have and with them they had begun to move the Ship.

The Ship had been moved some four hundred meters from its resting place; such was the story told by the still visible marks along the side of the canyon, though the sloping ground had made it virtually impossible for them to get it

far away from the gaping edge. And they had begun to turn the Ship so that its antenna did not point toward the Man-in-the-Sky, for the Ancients somehow feared and perhaps even hated Big Basta, the great god who daily devoured Sun. But the rocky ground along the edge of the canyon was softer than the Ancients had realized. It had crumbled beneath the weight of the Ship. Men and their great towing beasts had been tossed into the canyon and even the Ship itself, rolling, sliding, breaking nearly in half, had seemed in danger of falling fully into the gorge where the edge gave way. The Ship had slid and split, but it had not gone fully in. And there it lay to this day.

The Ancients had tried again to move the Ship, so the stories said, but had been unable. Their beasts had fallen into the canyon and many of the Ancients themselves lay dead in the bottomless depths or crushed beneath the Ship. Then the plagues had come and most of the Ancients had died. None of their children had ever tried to move the Ship again.

So it had lain on the edge of the canyon, visited once every four short years for the Sending.

III

WHEN Joval and his family returned to the crude lean-to and the smoldering dung fire the wine traders were making their rounds. This was the Night Before the Sending, a time to drink wine and eat and make love and rejoice in what life the gods had given to the men of Thisda.

Since most of the trade goods were buried near the place where the famlykow had died, Joval had little with him to trade, other than a large sack of seeds and three of the knives for which he was most famous. The small-eyed wine traders, men from the distant north along the Great Inland Sea, had little use for the seeds from the farm of Joval Sona Ramon, but knives—well, all men needed knives for killing wildkows and wildogs and B-cats and other men. A wineskin for each knife was a bargain for both Joval and the wine traders.

They parted happy, wishing each other a good Sending, a true Receiving and many sons.

Filling Amalthea's gourd to the brim, Joval drank the warm, bitter wine, smiling at the bite of it on his tongue, the burn of it as it went down his throat. Yes, it was good wine, worth his knives, he thought, and drank another gourd.

Amalthea, Filis and even little Masal each had a gourd of the wine and smiled at the unfamiliar warmth of it in their stomachs.

"This will be a good Sending," Joval said, drinking his third gourd, then wiping his mouth with the matted hair of the back of his hand. "I feel it within me," he went

on. "The famlykow's death was a bad omen, but not as bad as I thought. No, all is well." And he finished the gourd and refilled it and passed it on to his wives.

Somewhere near the tent of the Geriats, where the countless famly-dogs barked in anticipation of the scraps from the coming feast, someone had begun to play a melody on reed pipes. Soon a stringed instrument that Joval could not identify joined in—a voice picked up the words and they were strange, ancient, alien words that said:

The option of the thirty-nine took the loneliness,
Beside it, leaving just brown clay;
The Men of Earth do not come out of their homes;
Or like the local ether, sitting, looking,
Oh, improbable, improbable escapades
Under the stars;
Thoughts, nakedness, alone;
Our victory, our loss;
Accepted, but not comfortable.
Any planet, carbon-based . . .

THE words went on. Perhaps they had once had meaning, somewhere, somewhen, but not to Joval or his kind.

"Come," he said, rising to his feet, slinging the half empty wine-skin and a full one across his shoulder. "There is another song to sing and meat to eat and wine to drink. This is the Night Before the Sending."

His two wives also rose, Amalthea quickly, Filis with something like uncertainty in her face, for this was the first Sending that she had attended as a married woman and she was somewhat unsure of herself and of how she should behave.

"Don't worry," Amalthea whispered to her, just loudly enough for Joval to hear. "Our husband is good and loyal to the Way and this is the Night Before the Sending."

Filis smiled uncertainly.

"Masal," Joval yelled over his shoulder as he began to walk away from the camp. "Keep the fire going. You may drink from the other wineskin, but not too much."

"Yes, father," the boy said obediently.

Joval smiled to himself, remembering how it had been when he was a boy, how he had drunk too much wine and let the fire go out and crept down to the circle of light around the tent of the Geriats to see what it was that the adults did on the Night Before the Sending. So it would be with Masal and it was well. For that is what a boy should do on the Night Before the Sending. How else was he to learn?

Twigs and reeds and a dozen other kinds of combustibles had been piled before the tent of the Geriats and set afire. Near the flames there was bright, flickering light and undulating shadows and

warmth that drove away the chill of the night, as did the wine which all were drinking. Long spits extended over the edges of the flames, skewering the skinned bodies of fatted famly dogs and goats and famlykows, their blood and fat dripping, sizzling into the flames. The spits were turned by the oldest wives of the Geriats—withered, toothless old crones, their flat breasts flapping against their distended bellies as they moved. Insects flitted and the rich scent of roasting meat hung in the smoke above the flames, momentarily hiding the ripe, rancid odors of garbage and human and animal wastes that permeated the Place of the Sending.

ONE by one those around the fire had put aside their vermin-infested robes and blankets and stood as naked as they would on a warm autumn day. And they sang and drank wine and ate meat and made plans for the pairing. For some the planning stages were past; they had paired and the simple fondling, caressing games of adults had already begun, games that would lead to greater pleasures and perhaps to babies.

Between the fire and the tent of the Geriats stood the great maypole of the Sending, a brightly painted and frankly sexual replica of the male organ, a phallic symbol to invoke the friendlier gods, asking them for a fruitful winter's harvest and many sons; the Time of the Sending was also the beginning of the growing season. And often the gods smiled, for Joval's crops were golden at winter's end and his family growing. The gods willing, both Amalthea and Filis would bear sons three and a half years hence when their time came to deliver children conceived on this Night Before the Sending.

Old Gordon the Castrate limped painfully up to one of the roasting goats and tore off a chunk of meat with his clawlike hands. No one reproached him, for all knew that he was mad and suffered unspeakably from the great wounds in his abdomen and pelvis—the wounds of a savage B-cat pack that had attacked his farm and killed all of his family but himself, and very nearly him. The other beggars and cripples, more sane and mindful of custom, waited until the old wives of the Geriats cut the meat with sharp knives and passed it around.

Three men played instruments, two reed pipes and the stringed instrument that Joval had heard before. And half a hundred voices sang a crude song that spoke of the Paradise beyond the sky and the day when men would come from Earth to take them all to that wonderful place.

Green are her valleys, green in the sun,
And white are her tall mountain peaks;
Blue are her oceans, reflecting the sky,
And blue are her lakes and her creeks;
White are the clouds that float in her sky,

And black is the loam of her fields,
Green are her prairies, green are her hills,
And sweet and goodly their yields.
Tall are her cities that rise in the sky,
And straight are the highways between;
Silver the craft that speed through the air,
And pass o'er the blue and the green.
White is the sun that climbs in her sky,
And white is her moon in the night;
Red are her sunsets and red is her dawn,
Golden and lovely and bright . . .

ACROSS the fire Joval caught sight of the twisted face of Theo Sona Weyam. Theo had apparently already seen Joval and his family and his eyes seemed now to be fixed on Amalthea, whom he had lost so many years before. Any hatred that Joval had felt for Theo was gone now, and he raised his hand in greeting, but Theo turned away suddenly and vanished. Joval shook his head and ignored the incident.

Someone called for Melinda, the youngest daughter of Hansford Sona Martin's wife Gwel, to come before them and dance. But Melinda had been married to Frid Sona Turner the Midwinter before and was hesitant to dance before them all.

"Frid," Joval called, seeing Melinda's husband standing near the huge fire, a wineskin upturned, "you will not prevent our seeing Melinda dance this Sending, will you?"

"Joval!" Frid called back. "Come taste my wine, Knifemaker."

Joval, followed by Amalthea and Filis, went to where Frid Sona Turner stood along with two or three other men who had been watching a group of young women and speculating.

"It is good to see you, Joval," Frid said.

Frid Sona Turner of the Greatfamly Heath, a distant relative of Joval's, was a tall, strongly built man some ten or twelve years younger than Joval. A farmer and metal worker, Frid was a maker of plows as his father and grandfather had been before him. He was darkskinned and tattooed from chest to ankles in red and gold. A great livid scar ran down his left hip and thigh. Many years before he had been gored by a bull wildkow and still walked with a painful limp, though his strength was equal to that of any man.

"And you, Joval answered. "How is Turner Sona Lyle?"

"My father is well enough for an old man," Frid said. "He is ill with aching bones and stayed behind this Sending. Not coming nearly broke his heart."

"It is sad to see a man like Turner come to old age," Joval said, accepting Frid's offered wine. "Still, Frid, we would all like for Melinda to dance for us."

"She is my wife now," Frid said laughing. "She dances for me."

"It would do no harm for her to dance for us all," Joval told him.

"Well—" Frid pondered. "Well,

I will allow Melinda to dance if you will allow Filis."

"But I am no dancer," Filis objected, half stepping behind Amalthea as if seeking protection.

"With beauty like yours, you must be a dancer," Frid said, something between a leer and a smile on his face.

FILIS looked first at Joval and then at Amalthea, then back to Joval. Amalthea spoke first.

"Joval, let her dance."

The Knifemaker laughed. "Very well. Both Melinda and Filis shall dance, but Melinda first." He knew very well that Filis would probably not be asked to dance by Frid. Dancing was not what Frid had in mind for Joval's youngest wife.

Frid turned to where Melinda stood a few meters away talking with her mother. "Melinda," he yelled, "it is decided. *Joval* insists. You shall dance."

"But, Frid—" Melinda started to call back.

"Dance, woman!"

Melinda shrugged, nodded farewell to her mother and strode to the edge of the fire where the men played their instruments. For a moment she seemed to hesitate, then smiled, shucked her burly robe and stood for a moment naked, silhouetted against the roaring fire.

The young wife of Frid Sona Turner, called Melinda Dauta Gwel, was a rarity among the peoples of Thisda. Antique genes, dating back to the times of the Ancients, had risen during her conception, giving her a skin that was far fairer than most, hair that was golden and fine, bleached more golden still by Sun. Her eyes were large and liquid, with a strange, beckoning gray-green color and flashed with a teasing sensuality. No more than eighty-five years old, Melinda was just now a grown woman, and her lush, sensual body, decorated with the tattoos of blue and yellow, had not yet earned the green stars of motherhood. She was a prize for which Frid had worked long and hard and paid a great price in famlykows.

Alternately closing one nostril and then the other with her thumb, she blew her nose clear of ash and the smell of smoke, then breathed deeply and waited for the three musicians to decide among themselves what to play.

Finally the music quickened, and the girl began to dance.

"A lovely wife," Joval said.

"True," Frid replied, though he was obviously not looking at his own wife, but at Joval's youngest.

Turning up his deflated wineskin, Joval emptied it, tossed it to the ground, spat in the dust and pulled the stopper from the second. Turning to offer it to Amalthea, he saw that she was gone, and smiled. So it was on the Night Before the Sending. She would return to the camp before the first light of dawn,

and that was as it should be.

Having filled his mouth with wine from the second skin, Joval nodded to Frid and slipped away before Filis could turn and discover that he, too, was leaving. Filis would be fine, he thought, once she had adjusted. And Frid would be kind to her.

MELINDA danced savagely, sensually, with the untutored grace of one born to dancing, until she nearly collapsed with exhaustion. But Joval, the friend of her husband and her father, Joval Sona Ramon, the Knifemaker, was there to hold her and offer her wine and sit silently beside her while she regained her breath.

"Thank you, Joval Sona Ramon," she said slowly, teasingly formal as she spoke, though her eyes said that she was not displeased with the man that her husband had offered and would accept.

"You dance wonderfully well, Melinda Dauta Gwel," Joval replied with the same false formality.

"Thank you again."

Joval took a deep drink of the wine, felt his head begin to spin pleasantly, then handed the skin back to the naked girl.

"Frid has had his eyes on that young wife of yours," she said after drinking, scratching at the back of her neck for a louse that had sunk one of its heads deep into her flesh.

"And I have had my eye on that young wife of his," Joval answered, his desire for her already physically manifest.

"So I gathered," Melinda said, glancing up, appearing coy and shy, though her hand fell upon his thigh.

"There are too many people here," Joval said, though the crowd had now begun to diminish; couples, one after another, crept off into the semi-darkness of night and the light of Big Basta.

Rising, Joval helped her to her feet, then led her around the tent of the Geriats, into its long, deep shadows and the nearest thing to total darkness available.

Melinda paused for a moment to relieve heself, then went on with him.

Twice, walking carefully, listening to the dwindling music and to faint sighs of pleasure, they were forced to avoid other couples who had preceded them, but soon they found a place to be alone, where none were within touching distance, at least. Joval spread his robe on ground that was growing colder by the minute and drank again from the wineskin.

"You are a lovely woman, Melinda," he said, standing over her, looking down at the young, full body, the golden mass of hair falling across her shoulders and cascading down her back, the swelling of her breasts and the marks of her tattoos bearly visible in the half darkness.

"Don't talk, Joval," she whispered in reply, pushing the wineskin away as he offered it. "I need no more wine."

Joval dropped the skin to the ground and gently pushed her back against the robe that lay spread beneath her.

Melinda's body was warm and soft, ripe for the loving of a man. And he found that she was very, very good at giving a man what he wanted. This he discovered more than once during the short night.

IV

WITH the coming of dawn on the Day of the Sending, Joval arose with a painful head and loose bowels and the ache of fatigue in his legs. He had found his way back to camp before the coming of light, and had less than an hour of sleep before Amalthea shook him awake.

"Rise, Joval. The Sending begins soon," she said.

Joval rubbed his eyes, pulling the rough blanket around his shoulders for warmth, and twice slapped his bearded cheek to drive away the sleep.

Masal and Filis, huddled together under the same blanket, still slept, snoring in rhythm.

"Don't worry," Amalthea said, guessing Joval's concern, glancing over at the younger wife. "She pleased Frid and he her. Now eat and hurry. It is not seemly to be late."

Between mouthfuls of fresh meat, half burned, half raw, Joval tried to ask Amalthea with whom she had spent the night, but she smiled and refused to tell him.

Frustrated but not angry, Joval rose, kissed Amalthea lightly and went to the tent of the Geriats.

Within the huge, ancient tent kneeled all of the adult men of Thisda who were able to attend while the Geriats prayed aloud to all the gods, asking particularly that the radio gods look kindly upon this Sending and grant them also Reception tomorrow.

Then Theo Sona Weyam was called before the Geriats.

The Radioman, a free citizen of the Greatfamly Innman, was as tall as Joval, though more slightly built; he was a man fast on his feet in a fight and quick to anger. One sign of that anger was a long, red scar that ran down the right side of his face, puckering his mouth and giving him a permanent grimace. That was the scar of the knife of Joval Sona Ramon, given Theo many years before when they had fought over the purchase of Amalthea Dauta Suzan. Joval had won that fight for Amalthea and Theo had apparently never forgiven him for it.

Nevertheless, Joval was willing to forget their feud at this Sending, when Theo assumed the holy function of Radioman.

Theo slowly advanced toward the six Geriats who stood at the far end of the tent.

Since the day had already grown hot, nearing 30° or 35° C, all the men had left their blankets and robes behind them with their families and were naked as they crowded into the tent. Only the six Geriats were dressed, as was the custom, in clothing that imitated as nearly as possible the clothing that the Ancients had worn when they first came to Thisda.

OLD Robt Sona Dave, Geriat of the Greatfamly Clegg and the Chief Geriat, wore the uniform of Starship Captain, for on this day and the next he *was* Captain of the Ship. The other Geriats were dressed as First Officer, Simon Sona Christopher, Geriat of the Greatfamly Heath; Second Officer, Arn Sona Mark, Geriat of the Greatfamly Innman; Astrogator, Henry Sona Floyd, Dunagan; Engineer, Grego Sona James, Carter; and Damage Control Officer, Don Sona Rae, Geriat of the Greatfamly Bernard. A seventh uniform lay on the low table before them and this was the worn gray uniform of the Communications Officer.

"Theo Sona Weyam," the Captain said as the Radioman stepped before the table and took the position of humility, "you are the chosen Communications Officer for this Sending and Receiving. Do you understand this and your responsibilities?"

"Yes, Captain," Theo answered ritualistically.

"Do you have the Holy Manuals?"

"Yes, Captain." Theo offered him the three worn books that he carried in his hands: *Guide to the Operation of Subspace Radio Model AU-6-G, Revision IV; Basic Subspace Communications Theory; and Advanced Subnuclear Physics Simplified.*

"Have you studied these Manuals well and prayerfully?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Are you prepared to Send and to Receive?"

"Yes, Captain, the gods willing."

"Then I hereby appoint you Communications Officer of the Ship."

Old Arn Sona Mark, the Second Officer, lifted the gray garments from the table and handed them to Simon Sona Christopher, First Officer, who in turn gave them to the Captain.

"Communications Officer Theo Sona Weyam, here is your uniform. Wear it proudly."

"I humbly thank you, Captain, and swear that my actions shall never disgrace this uniform."

Theo rose, accepting the clothing, but did not put it on. Before he did so a long, elaborate ceremony of cleansing would be performed, which would remove the

last traces of here and now from Theo and, in theory at least, make him into an Ancient.

SINCE this was a ceremony that Joval had witnessed a number of times before, it had lost much of its magic for him. While it was taking place he allowed his mind to wander back to the farm where middle wife, Andre Dauta Sue, would be taking the young children out of the deep, cool burrow into the bearable warmth of early autumn. Young Peak, now more than a boy but less than a man, would be seeing his sixtieth autumn and winter, an age when a young male child learned of the ways of adults. Joval had taught him much: the times of planting; the ancient methods of dry-irrigation; the times of harvest; the forging of steel and the making of knives; how to read and write to better understand the mysteries of the Traditions and the Way and the old, old stories of their origins. And now, while his chest still ached with the pains of puberty, Andre would have begun teaching young Peak the ways of a man and a woman, the touch and feel, the arousing desire, the coupling and the fulfillment. That was as it should be, for there were no girls of Peak's age within many kilometers of the farm of Joval's family, and who else was there to teach the boy such things?

So, Joval thought without jealousy, they would have awakened that morning, Peak and Andre, and enjoyed their bodies with each other, and then they would eat and set out to do their work. Soon they would begin to remove the long, sturdy reeds from their storage place and then take them and set them in the sockets of the foundation of the house. Jak and Fran and tiny Dave, as young as they were, would be helping Peak and Andre to raise the walls of their winter home. Later they would help gather thatch that would be used to form the roof of the hut which hopefully would keep out the autumn rains that would soon begin. When their labors were done they would sprinkle water for the gods and wait for Joval and the others to return from the Sending so that the fall planting could begin.

After a while the cleansing ceremony was over and Theo, his back red from the scourging of supple, damp reeds, his body dripping sweat, donned the shapeless, ill-fitting uniform. Now he was the Radioman.

"Let the Sending begin," said Robt Sona Dave, the Captain, and the slow procession started out of the tent toward the Ship, chanting an ancient hymn.

EVERY third man carried a torch as they made their way into the darkness of the Ship, for the use of the Ship's precious

power was not allowed until the Crew had assembled on the bridge. Then the Captain would order the Engineering Officer to give the bridge power—and the incredibly ancient power cells, somehow still working after all these ages, would give the bridge light and the subspace radio the power that it needed to Send.

Hot as it had become by now, perspiration beading on his naked skin, Joval felt a chill in the corridors of the Ship, the same chill that he had felt each time he had been within it. Here age and mystery met his knowledge of his own ignorance and the ignorance of all of his people. The Ancients had known so terribly much more than Joval and Theo and Robt and all the others could even imagine. How could they ever hope to Send? Or Receive?

But it must be done, he told himself. This is the Way. There is no other. Forever. Amen.

The Officers entered the bridge. The others assumed their places in line according to their age. Joval, being older than many, was allowed to enter the bridge, though he stood distant from the subspace radio position; through the press of bodies he could see little of what took place there. It did not matter. Joval's seeing the actual Sending would make little difference. All that mattered now was Theo Sona Weyam. He had studied the Manuals well enough? Did he truly know how to Send and Receive? Would the gods allow it this time?

The Captain, Robt Sona Dave, looking less old now, stood before the subspace radio and intoned a prayer that must have dated back to the time of the Landing or shortly after, for the words were strange and at times hardly prayerful: "For God's sake," Robt chanted, "let this damned thing work this time. All we ask is one brief contact with Earth, a moment . . ."

FINALLY, when the prayer was done, Theo, his twisted mouth showing no expression, seated himself before the radio controls, said his own private prayer and asked the Captain to give him power.

"Engineering, power for the subspace radio," Robt Sona Dave said loudly. His words were picked up by the man beside him, passed on to the next man and the next, out of the bridge and into the corridor, down to the last in the line, the youngest allowed within the Ship this Sending—a downy-cheeked youth, his red and gold tattoos of manhood still raw and painful as he moved, his foreskin still a healing scar.

The youth grabbed the words as they fell on his ears, turned and ran back down the dark corridors to the engineering department where he gave the message to Grego Sona James, who stood there by torch

light, dressed in the uniform of the Engineering Officer. The Geriat, upon hearing the order, stepped forward, peered at the complex panel of switches through rheumy eyes, selected the one that was the most worn, flipped it into an upward position and said a short prayer.

At that moment, back on the bridge, a single green light in the lower left hand corner of the sub-space radio control board blinked to life.

The Captain, after offering the power gods a short, ancient prayer, said to Theo Sona Weyam, "Mr. Communications Officer, please contact Earth and inform them of our difficulties."

"Yes, sir," the Communications Officer answered in a ritualistic tone.

Beside Theo Sona Weyam was a low, crude table upon which he had laid the three Manuals. One of the holy books, the one entitled *Guide to the Operation of Subspace Radio AN-6-G, Revision IV,* was open and Theo referred to it constantly as he began the sequence of adjustments that should begin the Sending. Despite the fact that he knew the Manual by heart and had studied every last surviving word each day for the past four years, Theo did not dare to rely on his memory alone during the Sending. One single misstep might so anger the radio gods that the Sending would not take place.

FIVE panel meters, registering the amount of power fed to each of the unit's five major sections from the power supply, showed life almost at once. Carefully Theo adjusted the knobs below the meters until the needle of each rested exactly at the center point. When the final meter was adjusted, the assembled men sighed; the first stage was completed and the gods were still smiling. The Sending had begun well.

A row of toggle switches lay along the right side of the main transmitter panel, and though the lettering that had once identified them was worn away, an illustration in the Manual clearly labeled each of them. Following the procedure outlined step-by-step in the Manual, Theo went down the series of switches, flipping them upward, pausing until the corresponding green light came to life, then going on to the next. Transmitter VFO—on. Exciter—on. Emitter Bank—on. Automatic Frequency Selector—on. Power Amplifier Loading—on. Modulator—on. Subspace Converter—on.

Stage two completed successfully and the gods praised, Theo went on to the third and final stage, the adjustment of the carrier strength and modulation levels. At last the sub-space radio's dials and meters told him that all was ready; oscillators within the super-microminiature solid state and

moly-level components were generating signals. The signals, amplified, heterodyned, stepped up in power and moved up in frequency, developed electromagnetic signals of tremendous power upon which the subspace, faster-than-light waves would be impressed by the modulation conversion units. With a touch of his finger to a switch, electromagnetic energy would form on the cross of the hull antenna—energy that would further engender subspace energy that would leap from the metallic surface at speeds far in excess of that of light, that could cross the long, long light-years to Earth in minutes. All was ready.

"Captain," said Radioman Theo Sona Weyam, "all systems are go. The subspace radio is prepared to Send."

"Proceed," said the Captain.

THEO'S finger slowly went to the final button and with something between fear and elation in his eyes he slowly depressed the button and began to speak the ancient ritual of Sending into the microphone, the same words that had been spoken by the first Radioman so long before.

"Colonial Starship *Esanda* calling Earth," Theo began slowly in a sing-song fashion. "This is Colonial Starship *Esanda* calling Earth. We have made a forced landing in the planetary system of UR-420-48. We were hulled by a meteor coming out of pseudospeed. Lost most of our reaction mass—and we no longer have pseudospeed potential. Repeat, we no longer have pseudospeed potential. We are stranded."

Many of the words were meaningless to Joval, though men had speculated upon their meaning for ages. "Pseudospeed," for example. What in all the universe could that be?

"We're on one of the planets orbiting the Ko component of the binary star system; actually we're on a nearly E-type satellite of a Jovian world—mass of something like .64 Earth. The air is thin but breathable, but it's hotter than hell here. The planets orbit damned close to the primary. There seems to be no intelligent life here now—but there once was, but it appears to have been wiped out when the other component of the binary, an A1 star, came in too close some hundred and fifty thousand years ago."

Theo paused to wipe his hands on his uniform trousers, then went on.

"Damage to the ship in landing and a mutated local disease have decimated the crew and colonists. We don't know how much longer we can hold out." As he spoke the Radioman's voice rose in pitch trying to imitate the way in which those first frantic messages had been sent. "Earth, if you hear

us—for God's sake, help us. Get us off this damned place."

And so the Sending went, the ancient words repeated, the ancient plea for help, for rescue.

Time passed and the Sending continued.

V

LATE in the afternoon, far past the time of the Devouring, hunger and the most basic of his bodily needs got the better of Joval and he silently slipped out of the bridge, down the corridor and out of the Ship into the bright orange light of Sun. He made his way to where his family sat prayerfully watching the Ship, watching the violet flickering that played across the subspace antenna on the Ship's hull.

"How does it go?" Amalthea asked as Joval sat down on the blanket in the shade of the lean-to.

"Well enough," Joval said. "Theo has not made a single mistake so far. The gods should be pleased."

"Good," his eldest wife said. "You must be hungry"

"I am."

She opened one of the packs, took out a wrapped slice of dried famlydog meat and a small pile of treshen seeds. She filled her gourd half full of water.

Joval nodded his appreciation.

"Do you think it may happen this time, Joval?" asked Filis, blushing and ill at ease, refusing to meet his eyes, apparently still thinking of the events of the night before.

"It may," Joval said, smiling at her and trying to tell her with his eyes that what she had done, what they had all done, was as it should have been, as the gods willed. "It is all going well," he went on. "We may contact Earth this time"

He remembered his father's having spoken the same words many years before and he suddenly had very little hope—very little hope at all.

JOVAL drank his water and ate in silence, his mind wandering aimlessly.

"Amalthea," he said, once he had finished and had wiped his hands on the blanket upon which he sat, "where did you sleep last night?"

"Nowhere," Amalthea answered. "I slept not at all." There was a teasing smile on her face.

"You know what I mean," Joval said, annoyed but knowing that he had no right to be.

"A wife is not required to tell her husband of the Night Before the Sending," Amalthea told him.

"Yes, I know," Joval replied. "But you know with whom I was."

"Yes, everyone knows where you were," Amalthea said. "Is Frid's yellow-haired wife as good at those games as the young men say she is?"

"*That* is none of your business!"

"I know. I am just making a point."

"Very well." Joval sighed. "Keep your secret." And with that he lay down within the lean-to and almost immediately fell asleep.

When he awoke Sun had vanished and what passed for night on this side of Thisda had come, a pearly gray night illuminated by the reflected light of Big Basta. Famlydogs roamed the Valley of the Ship and howled forlornly at the sky.

Wrapping his blanket around himself for warmth since it would be very cold soon, Joval told his family that he would return for breakfast about the time of the rising of Sun, then went back to the Ship.

"NO LONGER have pseudospeed potential. Repeat, we no longer have pseudospeed potential. We are . . . "

Theo was repeating the words for the twentieth time when Joval resumed his place in the line on the bridge and looked again through the press of bodies at the glowing lights of the radio control panel. So it would go until tomorrow dawn, when the Sending would end and the Receiving would begin.

So Joval stood and watched and unconsciously scratched at vermin that crawled out of his blanket and wondered and prayed and thought and waited.

It *was* a good Sending. Pray it would be a true Receiving.

JOVAL and most of the others slipped out of the Ship and had a quick breakfast as Sun rose above the horizon. Then, as quickly, they hurried back to the Ship so that they would be there when the Sending ended and the Receiving began.

Moments after he had resumed his place on the bridge, Joval heard the Captain say: "It is time to end the Sending."

Theo concluded the ritual words and turned to old Robt Sona Dave, his twisted mouth smiling. He knew he had done well.

"Cease transmission. Go into receiving mode."

Glancing at the open Manual, Theo's hands fell across the controls, snapping off the transmitter's switches, then snapping on those of the receiver portion.

Receiver from Standby to Operation. Preselector adjusted. Band Mode. BFO. Subspace Demodulator. RF Demodulator. Audio Demodulator. All on, operating, adjusted.

For a few moments there was stark and total silence on the bridge. Men held their breaths and waited. Then the loudspeaker of the receiver came to life, snapping, crackling and roaring the strange, angry whispering of the radio gods.

"Maxium audio gain," the Captain said.

Theo adjusted a single control and the whispering roar became louder.

MEN had done all that they could do. Now it was the turn of the gods, but the gods did not choose to speak in the words of men—not at first, at least.

Joval grew very tired. One night of drinking and love-making with demanding Melinda, a second night of Sending and very little sleep in between were beginning to tell. Joval was not as young as he had once been. His eyelids grew heavy; his feet and legs ached; again he was hungry and thirsty and the waste fluids of his body demanded discharge. But he did not leave the bridge. No man leaves the bridge during a Receiving. That is the most crucial time of all. No chances are to be taken.

Fatigue finally became too much for him. He leaned back against the nearest bulkhead and let his eyelids flutter shut. He began sinking into a soft, pleasant, yet oddly uncomfortable blackness.

The subspace radio's loudspeaker suddenly changed tone. The vague crackling whisper was drowned out by a strange, unfamiliar squeal that rose in pitch until it hurt Joval's ears; then he could no longer hear it. Moments later came another sound—words, human words!

". . . for delivery to . . .on the . . .of albuti with . . .

The squeal returned.

The gasps of startled men filled the bridge.

"The gods—" a dozen voices said.

"Earth—" said another dozen.

"Wait!" ordered the Chief Geriat. "Be silent!"

The loudspeaker whispered and squealed and spoke again: ". . . items urgently needed . . . would suggest that . . . relay for Earth . . ."

The holy word! Earth. It was Earth. It was a true Receiving!

". . . for immediate shipment . . ."

The receiver squealed one final time, returned to the same monotonous whisper.

White-faced, obviously shaken, old Robt Sona Dave gathered the four other Geriats on the bridge and took them as far away from the subspace radio position as possible, where they conferred in whispers. Theo remained at his position, looking directly at the radio panel, something like triumph on his face.

JOVAL, as did all the others on the bridge, shared that triumph, but only for a short time. Then questions and doubts began to creep into his mind. The words had been strange and garbled and broken, only half understandable, but he could not help but speculate

upon them. It must be Earth, he thought, or at least related to Earth since that holy name had been spoken. But . . . well, did it really sound as if the speaker were talking to *them*, to the men of Thisda? Were there not others among the distant starworlds? Had not the Ancients said so? And did they, these other men, not talk among themselves by means of subspace radio? Could it be, really, that they were just hearing fragments of such a conversation? Might it be just that?

Joval, as much as any of the others, wanted to believe that this was a true Receiving, but it seemed to him that what had just taken place was not enough. Perhaps they would hear that voice again, and perhaps then it would truly be speaking to them.

The Geriats stood at the far end of the bridge, talking in their low whispers and shaking their heads slowly. One by one they returned to the radio position.

"Brothers," said Robt Sona Dave, speaking above the whispering noise of the radio, "listen to me. What we have have just heard was, in truth, a manifestation of the gods. We have been witness to a miracle." He paused. "But not our miracle."

There were moans and then stunned silence as the truth began to sink in. Joval knew that he was right. It was no Receiving.

"Though none are alive who remember it, this has happened before," the Captain was saying. "The Book of the Old Men tells us of three such times that words have been heard like this. But they were not true Receivings. The words were not meant for us. We must wait. Perhaps, since the gods have shown their goodness, they shall—"

Joval did not listen any longer. He wanted to weep, but all he could do was stare at the lights of the radio control panel and wait for the Receiving to be over. No one on Earth cared about them. The gods were capricious and malicious and a man who waited for a Receiving was a fool.

DAY passed into night and night gradually moved toward morning. The radio's loudspeaker whispered and chattered and roared and clicked, but it did not speak again in the words of men.

Theo Sona Weyam peered ever more intently at the dials and meters and lights of the panel before him, his hands beginning to twitch nervously. An awkward cough began in his throat and twice the youth at the end of the line was forced to go get him water. Dark rings formed under his eyes and his twisted mouth seemed to move without his realizing it.

The Radioman's time was running out. And he knew it. The gods had teased him, laughed at

him, and would ultimately punish him for *attempting* to Receive. So it had always been.

Old Robt Sona Dave, leaning on his cane when he stood but more often sitting as the time drew by, showed some of the symptoms displayed by Theo, though there was nothing of personal fear in them. It was just another disappointment in a long life of disappointments. It was not likely that he would ever live to see another Sending. So be it.

At last the Time of the Receiving was over.

Awkwardly coming to his feet, aided by two of the other Geriats and supported by his cane, he said, "Mr. Communications Officer, you—"

"No!" Theo Sona Weyam cried suddenly. "No, please, wait a while longer, just a—"

"Mr. Communications Officer," the Captain began again, "you may now turn off—"

Theo suddenly came to his feet and stood defensively before the radio. "Give me more time. We shall Receive. I swear it."

"You shall do as I say," Robt Sona Dave said sternly.

"Wait, for the sake of the gods, please—"

The Old Chief Geriat's hand snapped out, the back of his knuckles struck across the scarred face of the Radioman.

"Turn off the receiver," he said slowly, his anger barely controlled. "The Time of the Receiving is over."

Slowly and painfully, like a man dying—as in a way he was—Theo Sona Weyam turned back to the subspace radio and slowly snapped one switch after another. The lights went dark.

Torches were kindled and the procession was formed. One by one, led by the Captain, they filed out of the Ship, slowly, sadly. They had failed.

VI

THE beginning of the ceremony that marked the end of the Sending and Receiving took place before the tent of the Geriats, above the cold, dead ashes of fire and below the great fertility symbol. All the men and women who had come to the Sending drew close, forming a huge semicircle around the spot, knowing the inevitable outcome and knowing, too, what would happen that day before the Devouring of Sun.

The Captain announced in the words of ancient ritual, that Earth had not answered. Then he ordered Theo Sona Weyam to come before him.

The Radioman had aged a dozen years in the past hour. His eyes were blank and empty; his body was limp, his mouth twitched and his movements faltered as he walked to his assigned place before the Geriats.

"You are no longer Radioman of the Ship," Robt Sona Dave said. "Remove your uniform."

Theo nodded vaguely and began loosening the buttons of the uniform blouse. After a few awkward moments he stood naked before the others, no different from anyone else. He was no longer a demigod, but just a man—a man who had failed in a contest with the gods and would have to pay the price of failure. "Theo Sona Weyam of the Greatfamly Innman," the Chief Geriat began slowly, "the gods have shown disapproval of you, have deemed you unworthy of being Radioman of the Ship. Have you anything to say for yourself?"

Theo shook his head slowly, then finally managed, "No, sir." After a few moments of awkward silence, he fought out the words: "The gods know, Robt, I tried. I tried."

"So be the will of the gods," Robt said, ignoring him. "Return the Manuals."

Theo handed him the three tattered books.

"Theo Sona Weyam, you have one final service to perform for the Ship," the Chief Geriat said.

DESPITE the heat Joval felt a cold wind blowing along his naked back and seeping in through the flesh to his bones. No, it couldn't be that, he thought. Not Theo . . .

"Yes, Geriat," Theo said brokenly.

"Though you have failed, you have at least earned the right to suggest for us your replacement. Name us a man, good and true."

For a few moments a chilled, frightened hush fell over the assembled men, the beginnings of which Joval had felt moments before. And Joval knew that he had a right to fear more than most, for he well knew that Theo Sona Weyam was no friend of his.

Theo's almost inanimate eyes slowly scanned the crowd, stopping on one man, then moving on to another, picking face after face, then rejecting each. At last the eyes came to Joval; they stopped and peered deeply and long, bitter with hatred.

"I suggest Joval Sona Ramon, the Knifemaker, as the next Radioman," Theo said slowly, something resembling life returning to his voice.

The words were like the repeated blows of a hammer, but there was nothing Joval could do to avoid them. This, too, was as it must be.

The Geriats stepped back away from the assembly, huddled for a moment, glanced over their shoulders at Joval and scratched their bearded chins.

Somewhere off in the distance a woman sobbed, loudly and brokenly.

"Joval Sona Ramon of the Greatfamly Heath, called the Knifemaker," the Chief Geriat said at last, returning to his place, "you have been suggested and approved. Come forward."

Fear and a growing red hatred for Theo Sona Weyam filled Joval's breast, though there were no true thoughts in his mind. With great effort, he slowly walked to where the Geriats stood.

"Accept your duty and these Manuals," he heard the Captain say as if from a very long way off, as if in a dream. "Study them well. Four years hence you shall Send and, the gods willing, Receive."

Numbly, mechanically, Joval accepted the Manuals and fought to hold himself erect.

"Now, brothers, the gods pass judgment on Theo Sona Weyam," Robt Sona Dave said, though Joval hardly heard the words.

JOVAL stood with the others before the Ship, and the thoughts in his mind were vague, random and incoherent.

Masal had watched his father with awe and fear, for now he was something more than just a man, something more than just his father. Filis had tried to speak, but had been unable; pained sobs had broken her words and she had covered her face and turned away.

And Amalthea—she had tried to comfort him, until that something that was in her mind and on her face had gotten the better of her.

"Joval, my husband," she had said slowly, her voice husky, "I did

not know he hated you so. I thought he—he had forgotten it as you have. Joval, had I known . . . Forgive me for the Night Before the Sending. I did not know he hated you."

She had turned away, hiding her tears, and Joval, only half comprehending, had turned to the Ship to watch what would happen there.

Soon, he knew, the pain would pass. He still had four years to live, to work, to study, to learn all that he could about the Sending and the Receiving and perhaps—just perhaps—he *would* be successful. He knew that there was an Earth. He had heard its name on the subspace radio. It was not a myth. It was real. Perhaps he could be the one.

He glanced down at the books in his hands. One was the Operating Manual, and it was the most worn. In fact, the back was missing, as were a number of pages, though how many he could not tell. He looked at the last torn page, unconsciously reading the final lines:

Since subspace energy is broadcast in a very narrow beam—propagated as a beam of one meter in diameter and spreading no more than 3.6 X 10-9 kilometers per kilometer—proper orientation of the ship's integral hull antenna is of supreme importance over large interstellar distances. Should the antenna not be properly aimed, it . . .

AND there the lines ended. What more the Manual had said, Joval could not even guess, and perhaps it was not important. But he would learn as well as he could.

Someone ages before—probably one of the Ancients with their marvelous writing instruments—had scribbled a marginal note on the page, a scribble that Joval painfully deciphered. "The spread of the beam from UR-420-48-I-A to Earth should be no more than 374 X 10-6 kilometers. By my figures the power received on the Lunar grid would be about .9 microrandals. This should be sufficient for reception—if we could just get the damned thing oriented."

Joval shook his head with incomprehension. He would learn. He would have to learn.

Then he looked up at the Ship and the small, distant form of Theo Sona Weyam who was now taking his place atop the Ship's hull. Carefully the ex-Radioman was moving to his assigned spot, the very center of the bright metallic strips of the antenna.

The Geriats had already filed into the Ship, taking their positions for this one last ceremony before the beginning of the Trading. Now, Joval thought vaguely, the Engineer, old Grego Sona James would be feeding power to the bridge, and the Captain, Robt Sona Dave, would be seating himself before the radio. Now he would begin

flipping switches with the practiced ease of half a lifetime, building power, preparing to assist the gods in their judgment.

The assembly began a prayer for the lost soul of Theo Sona Weyam, who had failed.

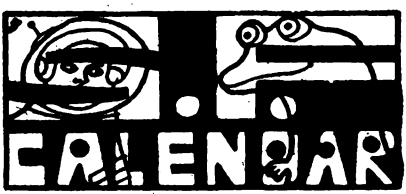
What followed could not have lasted the hours it seemed, but only minutes. Theo took the position of prayer. A sparkle of violet light built up around him. The Final Sending began—brief seconds, but enough for the will of the gods.

THE antenna glowed brightly. Theo jumped to his feet, screamed and flung his arms skyward as if asking help from the gods who had condemned him. His nakedness seemed to hang in space for a moment—then crumple, bursting into flames. His body was consumed in moments.

Joval stood looking at the violet flickering that played across the antenna and rose into the sky. It was a thin, faint line that rose toward where Big Basta hung directly above the Ship; the Man-in-the-Sky was now at the point of Devouring Sun.

The subspace waves moved away from Thisda toward the huge planet it circled—straight, true, direct—a meter-wide beam of energy that would end in the gaseous envelope and the rocky core of the monster world above.

And as Sun vanished and the sky began to grow dark with the Devouring, Joval Sona Ramon, the Knifemaker, Radioman-elect, scratched at an insect bite and wondered what was the significance of that. •



December 3-5, 1971. PHILCON. At the Sheraton Hotel, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Principal Speaker: Keith Laumer. For information: SanD Meschkow, 4413 Larchwood Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19101.

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July 12-16, 1972. EUROCON 1: First European Science Fiction Convention. Trieste, Italy. To be held in conjunction with the Trieste SF Film Festival. Membership: $7.00, attending; $4.00, supporting. For information: (USA) Tony Lewis, 33 Unity Ave., Belmont, Massachusetts 02178; (CANADA) Leland Sapiro, Box 40, University Station, Regina, Saskatchewan; (AUSTRALIA) Bruce Gillespie, Box 519AA, Melbourne, Victoria 3001; (JAPAN) Takumi Shibano, 1-14-10, O-okayama, Meguro-ku, Tokyo. Convention address: Eurocon 1, Casella Postale 423, 30100, Venezia, Italy. Send membership money via individual agents listed above.

COMPLETE
NOVEL

THE REAL PEOPLE

J.T. McINTOSH

Across the galaxy the two races of man sought to destroy each other—to prove their humanity!

I

ALL nine at the meeting were identifiably in uniform. But a certain informality prevailed, peculiar to final briefings where everyone except the senior officer—who was not going on the operation—knew he or she might not return.

This briefing was also unlike others in that the eight who faced General Print were in a sense only two.

The four men were identical to the tenth decimal place. Even in their casualness they were the same—all four had released the top two hooks of their tunics and all had thrown the left leg over the right knee. Tall and lean, each had close-cropped, prematurely graying hair. They were an amalgam of many races, white, brown, red, yellow and black, the result being, as often happened when races mingled, that they were at once striking and singularly handsome.

The four girls were also identical, but not to infinity. Their uniforms were not quite uniform. One wore her tunic, two their underblouses and the fourth a red sweater which looked like a gesture of defiance coupled with the green uniform trousers.

General Print said, "This, of course, is a unique project. There has never been one like it and there will never be another. Unless your descendants—"

"If any," one of the girls murmured, not loudly but audibly. The four men, as one, turned their heads to stare repressively at her.

"We certainly hope there will be descendants," said the general. "We are hoping that on your return the four women will be . . ."

He coughed awkwardly. Like many old soldiers, General Print could talk baldly and coldly of death, but was embarrassed by the processes of birth. He forced

himself to go on. "The four women should—on return to Eden— be pregnant. What is your reaction?"

The girl who had spoken before said, "You're asking quite a lot, General. At this moment, we are all pure and unsullied."

The general would have replied seriously, but all four girls giggled.

He said stiffly, "Am I to take it—"

One of the other girls said, "Nevertheless, the proposition does interest us. Imagine being ordered to be a bad girl for the good of one's race."

General Print said coldly, "I won't make it an order. What must be agreed, however, is the matter of command.

One of the men said, "Wil. It must be. He is the girls' father."

A girl said, "We've no objection to Wil's being in charge of *his side* of the operation, but *we* have to make the big decisions."

The general nodded. "No argument about that. Wil and the other Directors can advise, but you girls must take every major decision. The next thing to be decided is which of you will be the senior—"

A chorus of protest rose. One said, "It won't work that way. One of us can't be placed over the others."

General Print said doubtfully, "If you agree on that I suppose I must accept it. Now for the long view—total success would mean your return with the information we want and particularly with the . . . with the other item we want—and no casualties on either side. But I can't give you definite orders. One of you, perhaps all of you, may have to kill. But kill only in absolute necessity."

After a long pause, he said again, "Absolute necessity. We are not at war. We don't want to be at war."

Wil said, "General, my understanding is that it has always been our intention to—"

"On our own terms, in a chosen location, in our own time. Please be very clear on this. To have war forced on us as a result of this operation would mean failure. It might also mean disaster."

The general then felt it was obligatory for him to make a final speech. "I don't suppose I'll be alive when you come back," he said. "I'll never know if this operation will be Eden's greatest triumph or greatest disaster. Perhaps none of you will know either—although disaster can be achieved in a very short time, triumph could take centuries. One more thing I must tell you. Certain information about Eden and about yourselves has been denied you. It has been removed from your memories, because it is essential that the people you are going to meet should never learn it."

The four men and the four girls were regarding him with new interest. Several started to speak.

He held up his hand. "You must realize," he said in gentle reproof, "that this was not done lightly. However, the circumstances you may encounter are unimaginable. It may become necessary for you to know this very thing which has been deliberately kept from you. It has therefore been placed as a locked memory in Pariss's mind."

Three of the girls turned to look at the fourth as if they could read the secret in her face. Pariss herself merely looked surprised.

"If necessary," said the general, his voice sinking, growing husky with fatigue, "the rest of you together or any one of you—or Pariss herself—will be able to break the seal. You can guess how." He stood up and forced a smile. "That's all. And if I may borrow a phrase from the people you will be moving among, *good luck*."

FORT PLATO had never been attacked. The Terran Defense Commission, which had set it in space, armed and manned it, did not regard as very likely the eventuality that it ever would be. One of ten mammoth fortresses which orbited placidly billions of miles beyond Pluto (the similarity in name had caused confusion many times and would continue to do so), it was not as much a guardian of the Solar System as a warning. The Adamites were not fools.

The Terran Defense Commission relied quite cheerfully and confidently on one facet of Adamite philosophy and psychology—to the Adamites, defeat was death, although death was not necessarily defeat. Any Adamite attack had to be an Adamite victory or it would not be undertaken. Make an Adamite victory impossible and you prevented the attack.

Adamites and Terrans were not precisely enemies. But they were not precisely friends either.

Both claimed to be the original, the only genuine article, the "real people." It was tacitly assumed that the human race could not evolve and had not evolved independently from scratch at opposite ends of the galaxy. Therefore, said the Terran group of colonized worlds, far back in history we must have had an interstellar civilization which colonized Eden. Therefore, said the Adamites, in a time before our written history, we must have colonized Earth.

Being emotional—or at the very least political—these claims ignored anthropology or twisted it to predetermined ends. Eden had a head start in that their main planet was actually called Eden. Didn't the Terrans themselves have legends of a Garden of Eden?

One day a neighbor of a great man in Earth's history, Abraham Lincoln was called to his door by the noise of children weeping. Lincoln was walking with his two

small sons, who were both crying their eyes out.

"What's the matter with the boys, Mr. Lincoln?" the neighbor asked.

"Just what's the matter with the whole world," replied Lincoln sadly. "I've got three walnuts and each wants two."

The galaxy was the three walnuts. And Earth and Eden each wanted two.

THE Fort Plato night checker saw the girl the moment she emerged on the green. His eye was drawn to the scanner frame by the movement of her vivid purple dress against the lush green of the grass. Since the windows of the checkpoint overlooked the green he left the scanners and went to the window.

She was half running, half dancing. In the one-seventh Earth gravity her long full skirt whirled ecstatically about her. The checker, who was young, caught his breath.

She was beautiful.

Below the window was a duplicate set of alarm buttons. The checker's finger sought one, found it and hovered over it.

The girl in the purple dress kicked off her shoes, spun twice and sank gracefully to the grass, her long skirt settling slowly in a perfect circle about her. She was breaking no regulation and represented no danger whatever, save to the checker's peace of mind. But it was the checker's job to report and query anything out of the ordinary.

After a moment he took his finger away from the button.

Ten days earlier, after the sensor reported a ship passing within five million kilometers and a visual scan showed that the ship was a war cruiser, he had given the alarm—not a red alarm, merely a blue. Nevertheless, even a blue alarm was a matter for General Morrison himself. The general had come to stand by silent and watchful, until it turned out that the cruiser, a TDC vessel, had duly reported herself to the checker on the previous shift. The general had erupted.

He had been only a little unfair. Checker Alan Stewart, not having been told about the cruiser, had acted correctly. But Checker Alan Stewart *should* have been told about the cruiser—what, the general had asked, was the use of having a bloody checker if he didn't check, but simply panicked and stabbed every alarm button in sight the moment he saw any bloody thing?

Checker Alan Stewart was sensitive.

There remained, however, something a little strange about the girl, something he could not put his finger on.

Stewart went back to the scanners to take a closer look.

IF HE wanted to he could spy on any of the five thousand men, women and children in Fort Plato in any of its fifty thousand rooms, offices, halls, cellars, bathrooms, corridors, stairways, armories or turrets. But no one of a peeping tom inclination had ever been made even a deputy relief assistant emergency checker, naturally.

The checker was not a sentry. His function was rather that of a nightwatchman. Fort Plato, like most space stations, was run on a twelve-hour rather than a twenty-four-hour basis. The girl of course would be a night worker, a nurse or a technician seeking the deserted green for relaxation during a short break.

Unwritten law prevented the checker from being a peeping tom. But a girl openly sunning herself on the green, under the direct view of the checkpoint windows, was as public as a noticeboard.

On one of the scanners he brought her up to lifesize, half a meter from his face.

She was even more beautiful close up than from a distance. Her beauty was exotic. Her cheeks were lean, her eyes gray and alert. Her eyebrows were thick and black and her dark hair, though neat, was quite short and not glamorous.

The sunlight which bathed her had taken nine hours, twenty-five minutes and thirty-one seconds to reach her. It had had to be collected and focused on the green in order that she, far beyond the orbit of cold Pluto, could enjoy conditions similar to those on a sunny lawn on Earth.

Above the green was the blue dome, scarcely distinguishable from a cloudless sky on Earth. In the center was what looked like the sun.

It was time for a routine check. Sweeping the girl from the screen, Alan Stewart played a silent concerto on his buttons. All was exactly as he expected. The sensor purred and clicked somnolently. Outside Fort Plato no human beings were within its range.

He strolled back to the window. The girl was standing up, putting her hand to the side fastenings of her dress. She was going to take it off. Stewart's temperature rose. She took it off.

Stewart gulped.

As she lay back on the green, closing her eyes, he once again sensed the strangeness of her. His vague feelings never reached the point of uneasiness or suspicion. There had been a change of personnel when the supply ship called three weeks earlier. He took it for granted that she had arrived at that time. Her sunmini was anything but exotic. Indeed, in its precise minuteness it was thoroughly conventional. His imagination was running away with him. He reached out to sweep her from the screens.

Then he stopped.

The girl had a scar on her abdomen. It was a tiny scar, and would have been imperceptible but for the fact that she had turned to lie on her side and the light struck her obliquely.

That was an appendectomy scar. Stewart had no doubt of it. He had formerly been a hospital orderly and had seen such scars on the bodies of old people.

The operation was now obsolete. Surgery, at any rate surgery in the sense of cutting the body open and blundering about inside it, was no longer necessary in the treatment of appendicitis and nobody under the age of forty had ever had an appendectomy.

This girl was obviously under the age of forty.

In a flash of insight, belated but comprehensive, he put a score of things together and his finger stabbed at Key 1. The sirens, flashing lights, buzzers and bells of a red alarm were heard for the first time in Fort Plato.

Less than five seconds later, the cacophony was shockingly augmented by the shrill whistle that meant the alarm was too late—the fort had already fallen.

The checker knew the girl was a decoy who had played a part in making possible the incredible fall of Fort Plato.

And he was the criminal who had let a pretty girl divert him from his duty.

II

IT WAS blowing a full gale and a gale on the planet Outward made a gale on Earth seem like a mere climatic fit of temper. Earth gales did not suddenly cease or instantly explode into insane, murderous rages—Earth winds gusted, but conditions retained some semblance of consistency and could therefore be predicted up to a point.

Gales on Outward were consistent only in being worse than expected most of the time, no matter how pessimistic the expectation. Fred Manvin was therefore about to close the gate of Camp Eleven and gratefully seek the comfort of his cellar, since there was no longer any possibility of traffic on the road from the west. Any mole that had missed the warnings would have turned off the road and dug in to wait out the weather.

Then he stared. Clinging together desperately, two figures in white galesuits were coming along the road *on foot*. Their danger was considerable, although they were only some fifty meters from the gate. A gust might at any moment lift them and dash them to their deaths.

As he peered through the flying dirt and dust, the wind somehow got a finger into one of the strangers' tunics and tore it away in a split second. It flew high in the air and

disappeared. Galesuits were supposed to be proof against ripping, but in the final analysis nothing was proof against an Outward gale.

Perhaps because of the fusillade of tiny fragments flaying his naked back, perhaps because of the sudden chill, the man lost his balance and was dashed to the ground. He was saved from being bowled along it only by the desperate clutch of his companion.

The two were now only fifteen meters from the gate. The nearly naked man tried to get up but could not. A leg and an arm seemed to be damaged. Vocally consigning the regulations to hell, Fred Manvin went out and dragged the two inside. One of them, he established in the course of his ungentle handling, was a girl.

He tripped the gate switch and hauled them into the gatehouse, then down to the cellar. The man was bleeding from scores of small cuts caused by flying dust and tiny fragments. His left arm and his ankle were broken.

The cellar was warm and starkly comfortable, though small. It was so well insulated that not a sound could be heard of the gale raging outside.

Fred looked the man over first. He was forty or so, his dark hair graying at the temples. Naked to the waist, he was a fine figure of a man, powerful though slight. Blood streamed down his hairless body to his tight pants, but the many cuts were superficial and the arm fracture was a simple one which Fred, a general handyman, would have no difficulty in setting. The ankle was worse; there was a bone broken in the foot. Too, the man's head had been smashed against the road and, although conscious when he reached the cellar, he slumped senseless when Fred lowered him into a chair.

"Flare," Fred said. "You do it."

The girl took off her goggles. "What's that?"

"Fire a flare," said Fred, bending over the injured man.

"Certainly, if you'll tell me how."

"Go up the stairs again and—never mind. Sit down and don't bother me."

Verne checked herself. She said coolly, "You fire the flare. I'll look after my father."

Sal Slent was not, in fact, her father. He was her uncle.

"You okay?" Fred asked.

"I think so. Bruises, perhaps." She took off her helmet and tunic and Fred noticed that she was beautiful. He was not interested. Fred's wife was as massive as himself and skinny creatures like this girl seemed to him to belong to another race.

"I'm Verne," she said. "My father's Sal Slent. I can look after him. I know what to do."

"I guess I'll do this myself," said Fred. "Water over there. Wash all

your dust off. You know what'll happen if you don't."

Verne, probably the most self-reliant of the four girls, was annoyed at being dismissed as useless. However, it might be dangerous to say anything; she might reveal ignorance of things she ought to know.

She ran cold water from a tank into a plastic basin, found a bar of hard yellow soap and washed her face and hands, wondering what the gatekeeper had meant when he had said, *You know what'll happen if you don't . . .*

As her chill wore off she found out.

The flying sand and dust had penetrated everywhere, into her hair, her galesuit and even her boots. She began to itch. She recalled references to "the itch" in radio messages their ship had picked up. The very soil was inimical to humans in this hostile world.

FRED was stripping Sal and cleansing his skin with tissues from a box. He'd be all right after ten days in bed, Fred said, though he'd hobble for a while longer. Finished at last, he put another chair under Sal's feet and propped him against the table.

"Sleeping now," he said. "We'll leave him in peace. Now I'll try a flare, though it probably won't do any good."

Verne wanted to ask about the absence of underground passages, of a phone, a radio,—or at least a flashing alarm beam on the roof. Obligingly, unasked, Fred gave her part of the answer. "We extended the boundary last week. Needed more space. Of course you have to build the fence first, *then* develop the ground inside. Now tell me —what were you doing out there?"

"We weren't out there for fun," she said coldly. "Our mole toppled into a bog. We were lucky to get out."

"Oh, the marsh? I know it. But hell, it's fifty meters off the road. You were crazy to drive fifty meters off the road."

"There was rock the mole couldn't dig into."

"Sure as hell there's rock, but it's only a short stretch. You should have kept close to the road."

With visible restraint Verne said, "Thank you very much. Your advice comes a little late—but they say better late than never."

Fred frowned, trying to work that out. He decided it had been meant as a joke and grinned. "Well, no harm done—except you'll never see your mole again. The marshes on this hellish planet have never yet given back anything. Like some coffee?"

"Yes, please."

After all, despite their ordeal, despite Sal's injuries, despite her ignorance—which might have

made a keener observer than Fred Manvin suspicious—all had gone reasonably well so far.

She and Sal were in. Their part of the operation had started on a fairly successful note. Fred had told her himself that they would never see their mole again. It would not occur to him to doubt that the mole had ever existed.

STATION 692 (GP was one of several in Jupiter's orbit, although far from the planet. At full efficiency, ships were capable of operating impudently within the mighty powerfield. Often, however, they were at much less than full efficiency and there had been many nasty accidents. The General Purposes stations in clear space were far more useful in an emergency than the stations on Jupiter's moons.

Hugh Suyang, the commander of Station 692, awoke to find his station no longer his. The last thing he could remember was going to bed in a normal and routine fashion. A certain tightness behind his eyes, a vague consciousness of the passage of considerable time, enabled him to guess that while asleep he had been drugged or gassed.

When he opened his eyes in his tiny cabin, he saw a tall, lean man and a beautiful dark girl both in green uniforms which he did not recognize.

"Pleased to meet you, Commander Suyang," said the man courteously. "I am Director Far Slent and this is my daughter Pariss."

The circumstances of the Station 692 operation were different from those of Fort Plato and the pioneer settlement on the planet Outward. Hugh Suyang grasped the essential fact at once.

"You're Adamites," he breathed.

Director Slent nodded. "But please don't take precipitate action, Commander," he said. "In fact, please don't try to take action at all. The station is entirely in our hands. There are twenty-one of us and seven of you, giving us three to look after every one of you. You have all been disarmed, naturally, and we are all heavily armed. Appreciation of these facts—"

"Is it war?" Hugh asked bluntly.

"No," said Far. "It is not war. I do not think it will ever be war. Call it research."

Hugh would have liked to rise but he slept naked and the girl showed no sign of going.

"I'll be very pleased to call it research," he said. "Pariss, do you mind handing me a glass of water? My mouth seems to be full of sand. Effects of the gas, no doubt."

He saw respect in the eyes of the girl, who was impressed by his way of taking the situation.

"You could have killed me," he said, sipping the water. "Tell me,

what chance do I have of reaching my three score and ten?"

Their slight puzzlement indicated that the reference was unknown to them, which was not surprising since there had been comparatively little contact between Terrans and Adamites. Biblical references could not be expected to mean much to them. Yet they understood the sense.

"A good chance," the girl finally said, "if you don't try to be a hero."

Far Slent explained further, "We want the station to run normally. Possibly you or one of your six colleagues might, in the next few weeks, get out a message, a warning, an alarm. We must warn you—if that happens we will kill you all. Otherwise, when we go we shall leave you as we found you."

"You speak our language well."

Womanlike, the girl asked, "What did he say wrong?"

Hugh smiled. "On the contrary, he was too correct. 'We shall leave you—' We don't louse up our syntax with too much grammar."

"I think I like you," said the girl.

"Fine, may I have my station back?"

"Adamite humor," said Far pensively, "is not quite the same as Terran humor. That is one of the things we must study."

"If you won't give me my station back—is it too much to ask how you took it away?"

"I will tell you this because it may make you a little more careful, a little less impulsive. First, your entire detection system is useless against our ships."

"That I could have guessed," Hugh murmured.

"Second, we did, as you assumed, use gas to knock all of you out. We have a gas that is odorless and quick-acting. You can't expect me to tell you more than that."

No, thought Hugh. They would hardly tell him what new, special, secret weapon they had in reserve. Saying the station had been taken over by the use of gas was like giving cause of death as want of breath. What really mattered was left unexplained.

"Third," said Far Slent, "what has happened here is part of a four-pronged operation. There are three other independent parts."

"I see," said Hugh, not seeing at all.

"I'm telling you this because if the alarm were given here," Far went on, "the three other echelons might be prejudiced. And what is essentially a peaceful operation might flare into violence and bloodshed. It could even start a Terran-Adamite war. And the responsibility would be yours."

Hugh laughed. "Someone once said, 'This animal is wicked. It defends itself when attacked.' I'd better warn you, Director Far Slent—and you, Pariss—we're

liable to be wicked like that."

Far was going to say something, but when Pariss gestured quickly he remained silent.

Hugh was interested. Could it be that the girl was the boss?

MUNCHEN was the latest of many cities on Earth to have the dubious distinction of housing the UN headquarters. Geographically it had a better claim than most. It was within easy reach of all European and African members. The mighty American and Eastern powers had to come halfway, symbolically rather than physically, to meet here.

The man and the girl who called at the vast Personnel Building, near the Hofgarten, were surprised and a little uneasy at finding themselves rapidly shuffled from one official to another, each of a little more consequence than the last and each more shrewd and penetrating.

What sobered them most was the fact that they, unlike the other three pairs, had a specific job to do, the most important of the whole operation. If the organization of the Personnel Building were throughout as efficient as it appeared, they might find it difficult or even impossible to steal what they wanted.

The last official to see them was a woman. They did not have to repeat their story. She already had the details before her.

"I'm Miss Heilbron," she said. "You are Don Slent and daughter Gilen, natives of Maribis. Miss Slent, would you kindly walk about the room for a few moments?"

Gilen did as she was told, careful to copy the slight sliding movement of Maribisan women, cautious but not ungraceful. Her cheap Terran clothes— black jeans and a lace shirt—were newly bought. They did not suit her. Her hips were too wide for pants and her breasts too emphatic for the see-through lace. The poor choice was deliberate—she and Don were supposed to look like country cousins.

I should have thought," said Miss Heilbron, "you were Adamites."

"We have more contact with the Adamites than any other Terran colony has," said Don.

"I am aware of that. But your daughter gives me the impression of an Adamite acting like a Maribisan rather than the other way around."

Gilen tried desperately to calm herself. The strenuousness of her effort defeated its objective. She was, she knew, the most highly strung of the girls, the least self-reliant. It seemed sheer madness at that moment that she rather than Verne or Tomi had been chosen for this most vital part of the operation. "I've seen Adamite women only twice," she said. "They were in uniform. They're smaller than we on average. They

age prematurely." Recklessly, because this woman had to be diverted somehow, she went on: "If you, Miss Heilbron, were an Adamite you'd be quite old."

Miss Heilbron was a woman after all and the statement did not please her. She was sixtyish, attractive and in the prime of life. She might not show a sign of age for another thirty years.

"Do feel free to be perfectly frank," she said. "It makes a pleasant change from the tact of people who don't live on the frontiers. You, Mr. Slent, are going gray. Adamites might do that at an early age, perhaps?"

The situation was not improving.

"Yes," said Don readily. "You must remember that Terran life expectancy rose significantly only recently. The Adamites don't appear to have achieved this advance as yet."

"Interesting," said Miss Heilbron. "We'll come back to it. Meantime, you seek employment here as experts on Maribis. Why?"

They had a ready answer. Don said ruefully, "We are not clever people, I suppose. A small piece of good fortune at home enabled me to bring my daughter to see the Mother World. I underestimated expenses. We have dipped into the money which was to provide our return fare and must take jobs to make up the balance."

"You propose, I see, to work only for a month or so. Maribis has few dealings with UN, you know."

Don knew this very well. Their cover had been chosen because the Adamites' pooled knowledge of Maribis was greater than that of any other Terran settlement, and because the chances were remote of their meeting a Maribisan native in a short time on Earth.

"We require a medical examination, of course," Miss Heilbron said casually.

Gilen merely nodded.

"You don't mind? Either of you?"

"No, why?" said Don. Gilen admired his careless unconcern and wished once again that one of her sisters had been entrusted with München.

Miss Heilbron changed the subject briskly. "Yes, I think we can employ you both. Not, however, in the capacity you suggest. It is unlikely that the next few weeks will bring any need for the services of a Maribisan expert. But you obviously know a certain amount about the Adamites. Such information is rare."

She made a note on a pad. "We shall engage you to tell us every least little thing you know about the Adamites."

III

THE first thing to be attended to now that Fort Plato was in Adamite hands, Wil Slent's legal

officer told him, was the execution of Checker Alan Stewart.

"This will show decisively," said Arol, the legal officer, "that we are in control, that we are just, that we are impartial. No one act better fulfills the requirements than the execution of the one man directly responsible for the fall of this Terran fort. If we wait until another Terran can be executed as an example, his crime will almost certainly be against *us* and our impartiality will be in doubt. If we execute Alan Stewart, whose crime is against *them*, our stand will be clear at once."

"Yes," Wil replied. "But I must consult Tomi."

"Not in this matter," Arol said. "She is in some way involved. I suggest you make the decision yourself, Director."

Wil pondered for a moment. Arol, a young and ambitious officer, was taking too much on himself. He was too positive, too insistent.

The trouble was, Arol was right.

When General Morrison was officially informed he said apoplectically, "*You* want to execute him? I'd have thought you'd want to give him a medal."

"Your observation, General," said Director Wil Slent, "reveals a certain misapprehension about Adamite justice. Whether Stewart's crime is against you or us, it remains a crime which must be punished immediately."

"Without a trial?"

"Do you think a trial is necessary?"

"Most certainly."

"Then there must be a trial. I have met your legal officer. He seems a most reasonable man."

"Yes," the general agreed expressionlessly. "Most reasonable. There is one small point—"

"Yes?"

"He's Alan Stewart's brother."

Wil shrugged. "That might pose a difficulty if it were his duty to prosecute. But he will defend Alan Stewart. Have you any objection?"

"No."

"Neither have we."

The trial took place in the council chamber. It followed Adamite form rather than Terran, but as Advocate John Stewart told the general after consultation with Adamite legal officers, the form seemed not unfair and would certainly be quicker than a Terran trial. The only large difference would be the absence of the accused during much of the proceedings.

The jury consisted of four Terrans and four Adamites. Wil Slent presided because control of the fort was in Adamite and not Terran hands.

An Adamite officer spoke first, using his own tongue. Wil, who spoke English perfectly, translated the brief statement.

"We were able, by means which

I shall not disclose unless they prove to be relevant to the matters before this court, to take over this fort with no casualties on either side. The one alarm we were unable to put out of action was the Terran checker. He had to be diverted for a few minutes. The task fell to Special Officer Tomi Slent."

Wil was immediately replaced by Tomi, who wore the green uniform of an officer of the Adamite Navy.

She spoke in pure Terran. "It was impossible to reach the checker physically, but it was a simple matter for me to reach the green outside the checkpoint. The plan was—"

Here a Terran member of the jury exploded, asking what kind of trial this was supposed to be. Were they to hear only an Adamite-censored version of what had happened?

John Stewart replied to the objection: "What you are hearing is stipulated evidence. As defense counsel I've agreed that only this summary of the relevant facts will be given."

The juror grumbled but sat down. "I hope you know what you're doing, that's all."

John Stewart was neither popular nor unpopular. No one knew him very well. However, a man defending his brother against an alien race and a death penalty must surely be doing his best to get his client off.

Tomi went on: "The plan was to attract and hold the checker's attention so that he could not make any visual sweeps of the fort."

Here Arol, the Adamite prosecutor, stopped her. "You used the word 'random.' Why?"

"Because only random survey could show up the infiltration taking place. The success of the operation shows that all the fort's automatic alarms were successfully nullified. What could not be nullified —what had to be diverted—was the curiosity of the one man in the fort who could see what was going on in any part of it."

Arol turned to the jury. "The significance of this is that the checker in this fort is the human supervisor of a complex of machines. The machines failed. Neither they nor their designers are on trial. But the checker, placed over them as a final safeguard, also failed, and this—"

"I did not stipulate that," said Stewart sharply.

The Adamite was honestly puzzled. "It is an undisputed fact that he failed."

"It is not."

"On what point, precisely, are you challenging my statement?"

"I am challenging your right to make any statement at all. You are telling the jury as fact things which have not been stipulated."

Wil intervened hastily. However, Stewart did not press the challenge, apparently satisfied with a warning to Arol.

Tomi went on. "It was known that the checker at the time was alone, young, male. What I had to do was keep him occupied without arousing his suspicions. I—"

"Please repeat the last sentence," said Stewart.

A little surprised, Tomi said, "What I had to do was keep him occupied without arousing his suspicions."

"Without arousing his suspicions?"

"Yes."

Stewart turned to Director Wil Slent. He said, "Surely if this girl succeeded in her aims—and it has been stipulated that she did—she did not arouse the checker's suspicions. Therefore, where was the reason for him to give the alarm?"

Everybody tried to talk at once and Wil had to order silence.

Once again, instead of following through, Stewart stepped in smoothly the moment quiet was restored and said to Tomi, "Thank you. I have no more questions."

It was now defense's right to call a witness. The first called was Alan Stewart.

Alan Stewart was worried and it showed. He himself fully believed he was guilty and his brother had not been able to convince him otherwise. The fort had been taken over without a fight by four hundred men and women from an Adamite ship. He should have stopped them.

John Stewart unwrapped a peppermint and put it into his mouth. "When you saw the girl," he asked, "what did you do?"

"Went to the window and looked at her."

"Why did you not give the alarm?"

"She was breaking no regulation."

"Yet you finally gave the alarm?"

"Yes."

"Too late—and only four point-three-one-six seconds before the invading force gave it themselves by breaking cover?"

"I don't know the exact time lapse. About that."

"Exactly that. The figure is stipualted."

Stewart turned to the jury. "The checker *did* give the alarm. That's stipulated. The defense's case is complete."

He sat down.

If there had been babble before, this time there was uproar.

When Arol took the floor his voice quivered with suppressed anger.

He said, "This is some kind of Terran legal trick. We knew all along that the checker gave the alarm eventually, too late. What is in question is why he didn't give it before."

Stewart rose. "Oh, that's what's in question, is it?" he asked. "We can soon settle that. Stewart, why didn't you give the alarm before?"

"Because it was only then that I

knew something was wrong. The girl had an appendix scar."

Questioned by his brother, he explained. The Adamites were interested. This was something they simply hadn't known about.

"So," said Stewart smoothly, "you waited until you were sure, then gave the alarm. You were not suspicious about the girl but you kept her under observation until finally you knew she was not Terran. Then you gave the alarm."

"That's right."

Stewart sat down again, a casual wave repeating what he had said before—as far as he was concerned, the case was over.

Wil did nothing for several seconds. But he had to go on with the case. "Counsel, if it is your contention that it was not in Stewart's orders to give any alarm until he was quite certain a state of emergency existed, you must bring this out."

"I see. Stewart, when the girl first appeared, you didn't give the alarm because she was breaking no regulation."

"That's right."

"Who told you not to give any alarm until you were perfectly sure, absolutely sure?"

"General Morrison."

Stewart let the pause drag out.

At least he said, "You acted as you did in accordance with the orders of General Morrison?"

Alan had enough sense to say merely, "Yes."

"So if the fort fell when you might have prevented it—it fell because you were obeying the orders of General Morrison?"

"Yes."

Stewart turned to Wil. "Obviously the wrong man has been charged. You must charge General Morrison. And I'll defend him."

Wil wanted to consult Arol, but he could not, in the course of a trial, speak privately to the prosecutor without the defender's being present.

He turned to the jury. "As president of this court," he said, "I feel it my duty to instruct you to return a verdict of not guilty."

WHEN Wil and Arol were alone Arol said, "That man Stewart is a clever lawyer. This could be a bid for personal advancement. He may mean to put his general on trial and get him off but discredit him."

"All his stipulation led us on," the Director mused. "He was quite prepared to have us put his brother on trial. We assumed that the checker's duties included those of sentry and he encouraged us to assume this. The result was that the trial has turned out to the Terrans' advantage. And we can safely assume that if General Morrison were put on trial, the result would be similar."

"Can we? I would be on my guard with Stewart this time. He

would not catch me sleeping again."

"Napping," said Wil absently.

"Pardon?"

"They say, 'You won't catch me napping.' " Wil looked at Arol curiously. He had thought the man a pushing but competent officer. In his dealings with the Terrans, however, he seemed lacking in imagination.

Wil thought he knew why Stewart had suggested putting General Morrison on trial.

"Suppose this time Stewart stipulates nothing. Suppose he brings the whole operation into evidence. Won't we have to answer all his questions?"

Arol began to see. "If he did that—yes, by our own law we'd have to tell all the details. Your mind probe. How you and Tomi induced technicians in moments of inattention to switch off certain relays when they thought they were adjusting them. Our auxiliary non-electric drive which their sensors can't detect—of course if they could conceive of a ship using no electricity and with all batteries flat, they could design special sensors to detect such a ship. Yes, we'd have to answer all such questions. You can't try a fort commander for failure without full evidence of what he was up against."

Wil nodded. "So we must drop the whole thing."

Reluctantly Arol agreed.

Wil frowned. "We have made a bad beginning. We should have thought longer and more deeply."

"You're admitting failure, sir?"

"Not at all. We must learn about the Terrans. They have a saying that one learns by one's mistakes."

"An exceedingly dangerous doctrine."

"Yet perhaps it holds a grain of truth."

Everything in Fort Plato was open to him, Wil was thinking—the library, the logs, the records, the reports, the microfilm. Before he took any sort of action again he was going to learn a great deal from the library and the records. Nothing could be more urgent and essential.

Of course the Terran books and records would be copied and the copies would be taken back in the ship. But what he could learn on the spot personally was a hundred times more valuable than what he took back on film. On the spot he could query anything that baffled him, investigate and clarify what he did not understand.

Arol said, "If you let me have another opportunity, sir, I shall show you and the Terrans that I learn a great deal from my—experience."

Wil nodded again in Terran fashion, but he was not convinced. He wanted no more courtroom battles in Fort Plato, not when his own weapon, Arol, was obviously inferior to the Terrans' Stewart.

He wanted nothing at all to happen until he had learned from the Terrans.

IV

CONTACT was made immediately after Arol left Director Wil Slent and sent Tomi in. This was two hours after Sal and Verne were dragged through the gate on the planet Outward, four hours after Far and Pariss took control of Station 692 (GP), six hours after Don and Gilen arrived in München. The synchronization was very good, all things considered.

In Fort Plato and Station 692 it was easy for the Adamite pair to concentrate. In each station Director Slent was in full and open command and could lock himself in a private room with the girl, Wil with his daughter Tomi and Far with his niece Pariss.

In München the situation was more difficult, for Don and Gilen at the time were filling in forms in the Personnel Building and had to go on doing so while the contact occurred.

The cellar on Outward presented most difficulties, not because Fred Marvin insisted on talking—he was making supper—but because Sal Slent had just regained consciousness and had a mild concussion.

The eight did not know exactly what they were doing, any more than the savages who invented speech knew the mechanism of the vocal cords and the larynx. Tomi called soundlessly, thinking of Verne, Pariss, Gilen, visualizing them, hearing their voices, trying to guess how they felt, how they were dressed. More vaguely, conscious of effort and purpose but little else, Wil, Sal, Far and Don did what they could to help.

Telepathy, among Terrans and Adamites alike, was a rogue talent. That mind could touch mind in certain unpredictable circumstances had not been doubted for centuries by anyone prepared to believe the evidence. Most of the evidence, however, consisted of random, uncoordinated flashes, too uncontrolled for study.

The only people who ever seemed to get anything regularly and on significant occasions were identical twins.

The birth of the Slent quadruplets Wil, Sal, Far and Don had barely affected matters at first. Like twins and triplets of many races, each knew when the others were in danger, each sensed it when the others were injured. They had joined the Adamite Navy on the same day. The Navy had not considered their peculiar link sufficiently valuable for particualr notice.

But when the *Caron* crashed on a barren, unnamed world the unexplained, unexplainable knowledge of three brothers led to the rescue of the fourth and most of the crew. After that the Navy noticed.

The Slent brothers married similar girls at about the same time. All four wives proved infertile at first. The wife of Wil Slent had borne quadruplet girls finally, after taking fertility treatments. The girls were named Tomi, Verne, Pariss and Gilen. There were no other children.

The girls followed the classic pattern. They dressed alike, shared boy friends; they took mischievous, sometimes cruel delight in substituting for each other. Partly because their own link was so strong, partly because no young man ever isolated and identified any one of them for long enough and with sufficient certainty to make her fall in love, they remained huntresses.

When they were seventeen Pariss fell a victim to appendicitis. Within a week all the girls had to have the same operation. And about that time Wil Slent was embarrassed to find himself occasionally seeing into his daughters' minds.

He told his brothers and experiments were conducted. The Navy eventually found out. Being a Navy, it naturally considered anything new and startling in the light of a weapon. The question was, what to do with the Slents' talent.

Train it first, obviously. Under naval psychologists the Slents found they could work in pairs, one of the girls trying to reach one of her sisters and usually failing until her father or uncle reinforced the effort. Then a new bond was created—like a double wire in an electrical circuit, two Slents could achieve a special kind of linkage with two more. Each unit had to be one of the girls and one of the men, just as electrical contacts had to be positive and negative.

Having discovered a weapon, the Adamite Navy had to use it. And the biggest military challenge in the galaxy was the uneasy presence of two independent branches of the human race.

GRADUALLY the contact strengthened. The other girls knew that Verne was huddled in towels, felt the pain of Sal's arm and foot and head, saw Gilen writing in a bare, bright office, sensed the claustrophobic remoteness of life in a space station. Every detail reinforced the link. Then something like a conversation started.

GILEN—Don—*München*—bright office: Successful so far but danger . . . Terrans suspect we are Adamites . . . medical examination . . .

TOMI—Wil—*Fort Plato*—closed in: Avoid this . . . (Details of appendix-scar betrayal).

GILEN: Possibly not serious. Maribis contact with Earth incomplete . . . Such surgery likely, or at least

still possible, on Maribis.

TOMI: Then others . . . take care.

PARISS— Far — *Station 692*—closed in: Unimportant here. Terrans know we are Adamites.

VERNE — Sal — *Outward* —warm cellar: Warning useful . . . if necessary, scar can be explained. Not appendix . . . scar left by accident with knife.

TOMI: Terrans cunning . . . some cleverer than we.

GILEN: Must not be underestimated . . .

PARISS: Interesting . . .

VERNE: No great efficiency here . . .

THE flow was rapid and often inconsequential, like four rivulets running into a pool. In the depths fish darted—the other three sisters did not miss the evasive, mischievous excitement of Pariss, but whatever it meant it was not a thing for the father and uncles and they pretended to miss it. Each also sensed Gilen's fear as another thing not to be brought into the light.

In this first contact there was not much to say. They concentrated rather on establishing a good link, a link which would be easier to form next time because each knew a little about the new circumstances of the others.

In an emergency the link might mean the difference between life and death.

MISS HEILBRON sat thoughtfully at her desk. Finally she flicked an intercom switch.

"Tell Dr. Roger Miller to come and see me at once."

Miller strode in five minutes later. He said icily, "I have not yet been officially informed, Miss Heilbron, of your promotion to Director-general. Frankly, if my opinion had been asked, I should have said the interests of Personnel might have been better served by a move in the other direction." He paused. Miss Heilbron waited and smiled politely. At last he asked "In one word, Miss Heilbron, to what do I owe this dishonor?"

"Adamites," she said.

"Adamites here? In this building?"

"More precisely—in this office, very recently. You've never met an Adamite, Dr. Miller, have you? You're supposed to be an expert on Eden, yet you've never met an Adamite?"

He sat down. "My time is valuable," he said. "What is this cock-and-bull story?"

She told him about her visitors and how she had handled them. When she mentioned she had said to them: "I should have thought you were Adamites—" he sat bolt upright.

"You accused them to their faces?"

"Until then," she said mildly, "I wasn't quite sure I was right."

"But how can you possibly be sure now that you are right?"

She sighed. "I could never convince you, Dr. Miller, and I don't propose to try. I'm giving you an opportunity to convince yourself by studying these so-called Maribisans. Not personally. I don't want you to meet them."

"You don't want me to meet them? What madness—"

"Exactly, Dr. Miller—what madness it would be to allow you to meet them. You have never learned self-control and I'm afraid it's too late now."

Miller realized that for him to storm out of the room in a temper would confirm her words. He managed to maintain his icy front, even to smirk sardonically.

"What do you suggest? I am completely in your hands, Miss Heilbron."

"I suggest you give me your promise not to contact these two personally—and having done that, take over the entire matter."

There was a long pause.

Miller was of the same generation as Miss Heilbron, a tall handsome man in his prime. He had been married seven times and had given up matrimony for good; that it could not work was the fault not of seven women but of the whole female sex. He was a lonely man because there were few minutes of his day during which he was not angry, not lashing out at anything and anybody within reach.

Yet he was high in the hierarchy because any job he was given and genuinely accepted was done exhaustively, brilliantly.

"Very well," he said mildly. "You're wrong, of course, Miss Heilbron. These people may not be Maribisans, but neither will they turn out to be Adamites."

She merely smiled and said, "Prove it, Dr. Miller."

GILEN and Don found accommodation a great problem. At first they refused Personnel's offer of assistance. But all hotel rooms were taken or too ruinously expensive—they were supposed to be short of money. München, like many other administration centers, was bursting at the seams.

After walking for hours Gilen said to her uncle, "If only we could *feren*—"

"Well, we can't," he said calmly.

"I know, but it would be so easy—"

"Gilen, the one thing we firmly agreed on before we started was that we would never, after we were established, take chances by meddling with Terran minds."

"I know, but—"

"If anything happens anywhere to give the Terrans a clue, they'll work out the rest. In the two space stations, two or three or twenty

technicians were touched gently and caused to turn a switch one way when they thought they were turning it the other. The action was necessary and relatively safe. When a man does a routine job he's not thinking—he doesn't have to think. His mind is elsewhere. But we have no need of extreme measures now."

"I know—"

"You *don't* know, Gilen, or you wouldn't be proposing anything so foolish at this stage."

Gilen was hot, footsore and weary. She was conscious of being the weak sister. Opposition strengthened Verne, made Pariss laugh, excited Tomi, but bore her down and trampled on her. Having no place to sleep that night in a strange city was a small matter—if they failed to find accommodation Personnel would help them, she knew. But it got her down.

She sighed. "Then let's go back to Personnel."

They returned and were given a list of addresses. Five times they drew a blank, but at the sixth house they found two comfortable rooms and a bathroom. Gilen cheered up at once. She was the most mercurial of the girls. Now perfectly contented, she locked her door against the Terrans, her uncle, everybody, kicked off her shoes and lay back on the bed luxuriously.

Personnel was pleased, too. The visitors had been placed exactly where Personnel wanted them.

THE gale, like all gales, even Outward gales, finally blew itself out.

"You stay with your old man," Fred told Verne. "I'll get a stretcher party."

He was back in ten minutes with two other men, both burly, but slim striplings beside himself. One of them looked at Verne, who was draped in towels, with greater interest than at the patient he had come to collect.

"Verne Slent—Red Conrad," said Fred. "Here." He threw her a pair of jeans, a shirt and sneakers. Then the three men turned to Sal, who was feverish and only partly conscious. They wrapped him in blankets.

While they took him upstairs Verne put on the alien clothes. Soon Fred returned. He was alone. He waved casually at her as she made for the stairs. "Be seeing you," he said, but he was wrong.

A mole was waiting at the top of the stairs. These squat trucks were specially developed for Outward. They were heavy, ran on tracks and had two giant claws to dig into and clutch the earth.

Before she entered the mole she caught a glimpse of the settlement: row upon row of squat concrete buildings, the nearest some three hundred meters from the wire fence. Then Red, who was already seated inside with Sal, gestured impatiently and she climbed in.

Sal leaned in a corner with his

eyes closed. He didn't look bad, just tired.

Unlike Fred, Red started asking questions at once. "Born here?"

"No. Landed only a month ago."

"That would be on the *Hyperion*"

"Yes."

"Weren't you people on the *Hyperion* told anything? Didn't you have the faintest idea what Outward was like?"

Verne sighed. "I suppose we didn't believe it. We knew there was a storm when we landed, but no planetside storm is supposed to bother a ship like that. It didn't, really, except that we landed five miles from the terminal and had to walk."

"Had to walk? Oh, Christ!"

She decided to test something she knew about only theoretically. "Please don't swear," she said. "I don't like it."

"Sure, Verne. Anything you say."

"And I haven't invited you to call me Verne. Familiarity may be common here, but I'm not used to it."

"Familiarity? Hell, I haven't tried to kiss you yet, have I?"

Sal opened his eyes and seemed to be about to say something. Fearing his condition might make him say the wrong thing or even speak in a language that Red had never heard, Verne kept Red's attention off him by saying sharply, "Didn't you promise not to swear?"

"Did I? Oh, sure. Verne, you're a honey."

"I know. I've been told."

"I bet you have. Will you shack with me?"

Not knowing exactly what the question implied, she ignored it. Fortunately at that moment the mole stopped and the door slid open.

Red and the other man took Sal into what passed for a hospital—five beds in a bare room with yet another burly man in charge.

"Have you any money?" he asked Verne.

"No. We lost it with our mole when—"

"Never mind. We'll settle that later. He's Sal Slent, you say? Just these injuries? No infectious disease? Okay."

That was all. When she left the building with Red she found that the other man had driven the mole away.

THE air was now pleasantly warm and quite still. It seemed incredible that a killer gale had been raging a half-hour earlier. This unnatural calm was not to be trusted. A whiplash of wind could strike in the middle of it, without warning.

"I asked if you," said Red, "want to shack with me?"

There was no help for it. She had

to ask cautiously, "What exactly does that mean?"

"Got a man?"

"No, not—"

"You could do worse than shack with me, babe. Considering you've no money and no place to go, you could hardly do better. I'm not hard to get on with. I won't hit you unless you ask for it. I'm a construction foreman—good pay, no dependents. Two rooms and a bathroom to myself. Haven't had a woman since I threw Rose out five weeks ago."

"Why did you throw her out?"

"Too many other men. I'll be reasonable about that. There's about five hundred men here and less than two hundred women. I don't expect you to act like a wife. But not too many other men, huh? Three or four, maybe. That's fair, isn't it?"

"I've never been with a man and I have no immediate desire for a change in the situation."

"Like that, is it?" He nodded to himself. "Guess you lost somebody in the *Hyperion* business."

She hesitated only a moment, then nodded.

What she and Sal knew about the Outward settlement had been learned from radio messages, plus letters, log books, reports and other documents found in the shell of a ship which had blown up. From radio messages which had flahed between the forty or so outposts on the planet she knew as much about the *Hyperion* incident as anyone who had not been directly involved.

The hurricane had killed nine hundred seventy-four people. On the planet Outward, you just didn't set out in a straggling file to walk five miles over bare moorland. Verne knew from intercepted radio messages that only ninety bodies had ever been found. The rest had been dashed to pieces, swept scores of miles away, blown into marshes, killed by the gnomes or sucked bloodless by the hemmers.

"Well, look," he said and struggled for a moment. "If it's like that— I'll marry you if you like."

It was clear he thought he was offering her a great deal.

"Where I come from," she said, ready to say Earth if he asked, "we have a thing called engagement. We can be engaged if you like."

Red laughed derisively. That's not for Outward. Especially not for Camp Eleven. Sure, a girl can say she isn't going to have anything to do with men. Or she can say it's marriage or nothing. But being engaged—that means you say you'll marry me some time but not now, huh?"

She nodded.

"And meantime you move in with me?"

She nodded again.

"That means you think I'm a sucker."

"You think so? It means I trust you."

He grunted. "That's a poke in the guts."

"Why?"

Verne shrugged. "All right. I need a job and somewhere to sleep. Where do I go and whom do I see?"

One word diverted him. "Whom do you see? Christ, that fancy talk—"

"Don't swear."

Red rolled his eyes to heaven. At last he said, "Like I told you, you're a honey. Maybe you're worth it, babe, if you stand up to everything the way you stand up to me. But one thing—if you're going to be engaged to me there aren't going to be any other men at all."

"Naturally," Verne said, surprised. "Obviously."

Being engaged to Red seemed a good idea, especially when she remembered a cynical Terran quote on the subject she had picked up somewhere: *Engagement—a period during which a girl looks around to see if she can do better for herself...*

HUGH and Pariss were in one of the observatories, lying back in deep, comfortable chairs and watching the stars.

"You're a very lovely girl," said Hugh.

Pariss had been told this before but not by a Terran.

"Thank you."

"Although Terrans generally would think you are attractive perhaps I appreciate you more than most. You're obviously of mixed race and so am I. I'm half Caucasian, a quarter Polynesian and another quarter Asian. Our children would be the ultimate in racial representation."

She started slightly at the mention of children.

"Tell me about yourself," he said. "I'm interested."

She smiled, stood up and began to walk about. "Hugh, let's make a deal. I give you something and you give me something. Information—true and useful information. And we go on like that until one of us cheats."

"Splendid idea. I hope you won't think it's cheating if I suggest that since it's your idea, you go first."

"We Adamites fear the Terrans," said Pariss quietly. "We should like to ignore you. We'd rather you didn't exist. But since we learned fifty years ago that you do exist, we've changed our whole way of life—now I think it's time you said something."

"I think," said Hugh slowly, "we'd also prefer that you didn't exist. When one human culture numbering umpteen billions ran into another nearly as large, it was a shock, of course—and not a particularly pleasant one. You have nothing we want, except your Earth-type worlds. To get them for ourselves we'd have to fight

you and exterminate you. And we don't want that."

"Why?"

"You're breaking your own rules," he said mildly. "Now you tell me something."

"All right. We're more united than you. It wasn't always so, but about five centuries ago we fought ourselves to a standstill. So few of us were left that we were brought face to face with the prospect of extinction. That's why there are fewer of us than of you. But at least we learned our lesson. There won't be any more Adamite civil wars, anyway not for another five centuries."

"That's more than we can say. In fact, maybe you've put your finger on the crux of the matter—and if that's why Eden has discouraged contact and trade between the two peoples for half a century, maybe she's right. It's typical of Terrans that there'll always be some idiot who'll pull the trigger But now we come to why you're here Pariss."

"We told you. To learn."

"Sure, but there's more than that. There must be. Maybe you mean to fight now because you've got something we haven't got and you think you can win. I suppose it's no use asking exactly how you took over this station?"

"No, but I'll tell you this, Hugh—it isn't anything really big, really important. It's nothing to make you edgy. It's nothing that would enable us to beat Earth."

Hugh, who had remained in his chair, stood up and took her hands in his. She didn't resist. He was very gentle.

"Thanks, Pariss," he said. "You told me something important and I believe you. Just to be fair, I'll tell you something important too. I can take over this station again any time I like and by means so simple it's really ludicrous—but I won't, meantime. You see, I want to find out just how you did it—and more important, just why you did it."

"We want information, that's all." She wasn't meeting his eyes.

"You're cheating, Pariss."

She raised her eyes to his and looked at him steadily. "Only a little. What we want in addition to information can't be all that important. And some of it at least—some of it—I think I could have right now for the asking."

"Go ahead. Ask."

She drew her hands away from him. "Not now, Hugh. Not just yet."

THE second conference, which should have been easier, more complete, more informative than the first, was none of these things.

PARISS—Far—*Station 692:* Hugh Suyang is nice . . .

TOMI—Wil—*Fort Plato:* Pariss, you're supposed to be working, not playing.

PARISS: I am. He's nice, but there's something more important than that. He's a latent telepath. We suspected it when we were working on the plan to take over the station and we therefore bypassed him. His latent ability, which he doesn't yet suspect, has enabled him to guess certain things about me, about us.

TOMI: You're on the spot, you know the circumstances. Is it necessary to kill him?

PARISS: No, no, no! This might be the worst thing we could possibly do. [Something held back.]

TOMI: If it is necessary it must be done.

PARISS: What has happened in Fort Plato to make you so harsh, Tomi?

TOMI: Our first moves here have resulted in a moral victory for the Terrans. We have to be careful . . .

GILEN—Don—*München:* Of course we're being careful. I don't understand . . .

VERNE—Sal—*Outward:* Understanding among us is bound to become more difficult as our differing experience drives us wider apart. Incidentally, I've just been asked to marry a Terran.

TOMI) [Shock, interest. Agreement that it would be most interesting if Verne married the Terran and reported on the experience.]
GILEN)
PARISS)

VERNE: It is quite clear that Pariss is prepared to become emotionally involved with this Hugh Suyang. My situation is different. I have no love for Red Conrad. If it seems necessary to marry him I'll do so entirely for the sake of the project.

TOMI: Good. You're entirely right, Verne. Pariss, is what Verne said true?

PARISS: I don't think of Hugh Suyang as a Terran, if that's what you mean. I think of him only as a man.

TOMI: That's all very well. But remember, you hold a secret, a secret that must be important. And you have said Suyang is a latent telepath. You must be very careful.

PARISS: [All that came was a chuckle.]

V

RED'S house was surprisingly comfortable. It held amenities Verne had not expected. Externally it was merely a squat concrete box with a single door and two small fixed windows of thick plastic. Inside it was a proper house, with a fully adequate bathroom, a kitchen with all the necessary fittings, a living room and a small bedroom.

"That's yours," Red said of the bedroom. He frowned. "Verne, I still think I'm a sucker."

"Why?"

"Even thinking of letting you get away with this. Now I have to go and register you. What can you do?"

She knew about this. On Outward where you came from and why were unimportant—but what you could do was vital.

"Quite a lot of things. I'm a fair electrician, a good shot with any gun. I can nurse, though I'd rather not. I can learn to work any machine in about half an hour and I can count better in my head than most people can with a calculator. I'm used to working with chemicals. I can draw anything you want drawn. I've done a lot of work with glass—"

"Honey," said Red with a marked change of tone, "I want to know you can do what you say. Here."

He gave her a drawing pad and a stylus. "Make a picture of me."

"What?"

"You say you can draw anything I want drawn. Draw me."

She found the stylus could make thin lines, thick lines, dark and light lines. She sketched quickly, competently.

Red had an interesting face, she discovered as she worked. The eyes were deep-set and hard, but they could become soft. Possibly he was a sentimentalist. He had thick sensual lips. Probably he would be furious if she pointed out that they were almost feminine. His face had lines it should not have had at his age—he could not yet be thirty.

She did a quick portrait, careful to omit the finishing touches that might betray an alien art.

Nevertheless, when she offered it to him, he was startled, even awed.

"Christ!" he breathed. "You sure as hell can draw, honey. Is that me?"

"It's meant to be."

"I'm no expert. But I'd say this was —well, as I say, I'm no expert. What I want to know is, if you can draw like this, why did you come to Outward?"

"I don't understand."

"Honey, most of us are nothing much or we wouldn't be here. I don't mean people who were born here—I mean dumb guys like me who came from other places. Here I'm a big shot, but where I come from I'd never have amounted to

much. You, now—you have talent. You didn't need to come here."

"Perhaps I just wanted to."

He was not satisfied, yet he was prepared to drop the subject for the moment. "Anyway, I have to report you. I won't report your old man. He can do it himself."

She nodded.

"Make us some supper. I'll be back in half an hour. If I put you down as a draftsman—think you can handle the job?"

"I expect so."

"I guess that's why you came to Camp Eleven, huh? We sure as hell need draftsmen."

He didn't wait for an answer, which was just as well, since Verne was not quite sure what to answer.

Left alone in the house, she completed a quick survey without learning very much. She went into the kitchen.

And there, standing menacingly in the middle of the floor, was a gnome. It made its intentions clear at once. In a grating, rasping voice, it said, "Eam gontu kilyu."

It took her a few seconds to realize that it was speaking not its own language, but Terran: *I am going to kill you . . .*

HOW it had gotten there—it had certainly not been there when Red showed her the kitchen—was an academic question on which she wasted no time.

There was no doubt it was a gnome. Outward had only two indigenous mobile life forms. The hemmers were long and low and walked on six short legs. This creature was shaped like two stones with a larger stone set on top of them and a smaller one on top of that, faintly reminiscent of human legs, trunk and head. It was uniformly reddish-brown, exactly the color of Outward soil. It carried nothing and wore no clothes. The arms were the most nonhuman feature, although they emerged at approximately the right places. They were flexible, boneless, handless and could be as short as half a meter or as long as four meters when they lashed out like tentacles.

She had, unfortunately, pulled the door shut as she entered. To open it she would have to turn and operate the handle—the work of a moment, but a moment she would not be allowed.

She knew theoretically of the incredible toughness of the gnomes' hide—it enabled them to survive the rigors of Outward's climate, alone, without houses, burrowing into the ground with those incredible arms when storms lashed the planet's surface. She could achieve nothing against the intruder with her bare hands or her softshod feet.

One of the tentacles lashed out. It brushed her jeans quite lightly, midway between waist and groin, a little to the left of center.

The tentacle, which had

narrowed to the thickness of a human wrist as it reached her, on its return swelled to the thickness of the creature's head.

"Why do you want to kill me?" she asked, just to say something. Any delay was to her advantage. There was a heavy pot on the cooker. But the gnome was between her and it.

"Eam gontu kilyu," the creature rasped and she suspected it knew only a few phrases, perhaps one only.

She tried to use the one weapon she had—her mind. The effort failed completely. 'Sal was evidently asleep, perhaps doped, and without him she could not reach the others. Her own effort, without their assistance, bounced back at her. The gnome had a mind of sorts, but it was tough as the body. All she could touch was hate and cruelty—and there was no better shield against any mind probe than hate.

She tried to touch Red and found certain contact. She sensed he was thinking, *Someone's walking on my grave*, a phrase that meant nothing to her.

The gnome's other arm lashed out. It caught her around the waist like a whip, spinning her a half turn. The gnome wanted to inspect her back. It proved uninteresting, and so the tentacle spun her again just as she was considering a snatch at the door handle.

The tentacle constricted about her diaphragm until she gasped. The gnome could quite easily crush her to death.

It had no immediate intention of doing so, however, still being moved by curiosity. It knew she was completely in its power. It could kill her any time it wished.

AGAIN a tentacle shot out. The creature wanted to check something. Verne's hip bones were hard and she was hard across the back. The waist was soft and the tentacle probed softness down her front. The gnome prodded her abdomen and hips, establishing the areas of softness. Then the gnome tested her solar plexus and noted Verne's discomfort when this area was rammed hard. It also felt her ribs and established that slaps there did not trouble her.

Verne called Red mentally again. Nothing happened.

So she tried the gnome, with exactly the same result she had noted before. Hate and cruelty were there. Perhaps the cruelty she sensed explained what was happening. The gnome not only wished to find out about humans, his enemies, and not only carefully stored up in his brain a knowledge of their obvious weak spots; he was also trying to terrify her. His greatest victory would be frightening her to death. She was to realize that the death blow could come at any time now—and certainly would come—but never to know when.

"I don't fear you," she said. Again the words were just something to say.

"Eam gontu kilyu," said the gnome. A tentacle wavered out again, slowly this time. Verne moved a little to avoid it, failing, but getting herself away from the door. If help were to come, it would come through there. She didn't want to be in the way of a shot at the gnome.

The tentacle barely touched her, so gently that she guessed it was listening. The idea suggested what the creature's purpose was. The gnome wanted to locate her heart.

It had tried the abdomen first. Perhaps the gnome's own heart was there. In the unlikely event of her escaping this crisis and subsequently facing a gnome when she was wearing steel boots, she intended to lunge at its underbelly.

Having found the heart, the gnome punched it viciously with the other tentacle.

Verne cried out in pain, staggered and had to press back against the wall to recover herself. But she was only momentarily hurt. The blow was no harder than that of a man's fist and, the gnome being short, it came from below.

She did not think the blow was meant to be fatal. The gnome was doing what all cruel creatures did—demonstrating, after all this suspense, that it meant to hurt her, that her death was not to be quick and easy.

Yet for the first time she began to hope. The gnome was making a mistake. It had not probed her throat, because its own head was set into its trunk with no neck. A quick thrust and constriction with either tentacle would have strangled a human more quickly than any other means—but the creature had picked on the heart area, which in a human was reasonably well protected against mere blows.

If Red came back, if the gnome found itself with only a second or two in which to kill her, it would strike at her heart. And though this would not be fun, almost certainly she would survive.

Delay became more important than ever.

She was delighted to discover that the gnome was going on with the game. A tentacle lightly touched her face and then her shirt. Apparently for the first time the gnome realized that her clothing was not part of her.

The tentacle became a claw and ripped her shirt. The gnome deliberated for several seconds, its little red eyes surveying her coldly. Then the tentacle tore the tatters from her body.

Gnomes were not too bright. His new discovery occupied this one for a long time. It retracted the tentacle and stood motionless for fully two minutes while it decided that the tall, thin creature which faced it was pink all over. Or

something equally inconclusive. Next it tried to tear her pants, but they fitted snugly. Without more violence than it seemed at the moment prepared to employ, the gnome could get nowhere.

With a change of approach, it punched savagely at the solar plexus. This time, although Verne was hurt considerably, she tried not to show it.

Suddenly the gnome moved its feet. At the same time she heard a door opening in the house. Red was back.

The gnome said, "Ecum bak for-yu"—

It turned and clawed open a cupboard door. There was a hole in the floor, a hole less than half the gnome's diameter. But it flowed into the hole head first and Verne realized that the rest of its body was as pliable and boneless as its versatile tentacles.

It made no attempt to strike at Verne, although it would have had plenty of time to stab at her heart and still get into the hole before Red arrived.

Nevertheless, she felt its hate, its cruelty, its fearlessness and its desire to kill her. And its words echoed in her brain: *I'll come back for you.*

RED burst in, sniffling, "Gnomes!" he shouted.

"Not gnomes. Just one gnome."

"Where?"

"It went that way." She showed him the hole.

He swore. His rage was directed mainly against the crew that had built the house. "Damn them to hell! I'll get them. Jerry-building on Earth is only dishonest. Here it's murder. The foundations are supposed to be six-inch reinforced concrete. The gnomes and hemmers can't get through that."

He bent to examine the floor in the cupboard. "This is only a shell. Damn —I hope a gnome gets the foreman."

Still sniffing, he turned to her, his eyes widening. Until now, the gnome's recent presence had distracted him from noticing that she was naked above the waist.

Awkwardly he turned away. "What in hell happened? It didn't get a chance to get at you, huh? Did it pop its head through the hole just as I got back?"

"It's been here since you left. So was I."

Red stiffened. "But that's impossible. I mean—"

He looked at her again, noticing now the red marks on her body. His eyes dropped to the torn shirt where the gnome had flung it.

"It was here with you," he said incredulously, "all that time? And you're still alive—"

She moved to the sink and washed herself where the gnome's tentacles had touched her, having learned already that plain cold water was effective against the

irritants of Outward. As she did so, she told Red in detail what had happened.

He didn't say a word. He kept looking at her incredulously, occasionally shaking his head.

With some asperity Verne asked, "You don't believe me? You think I'm a liar?"

"Oh, I believe you all right. I can still smell the gnome and I saw his mark on you." Suddenly his tone grew angry. "Will you for Pete's sake cover yourself? What are you trying to do to me?"

"I have nothing else to wear."

He rushed from the room and returned with a shirt. He threw it at her. She put it on. Red was ashamed of his outburst, she sensed. He was again regarding her with the awe, the wonder that she had seen before.

"Well, tell me," she said. "I was sure, too, that the gnome would never let me live. But it did. Doesn't that ever happen?"

"I've heard of it," said Red slowly. "Certainly it happens. But I've never heard of it happening with a girl. The gnomes are cruel. Cruelty is built into them. They're cruel as the planet is cruel. Human sadists get a kick out of hurting people, but we think the gnomes get even more out of it. They like to hurt, but it's fear that counts. Particularly fear of death."

She nodded. "That's what I thought."

"When they catch a victim and they have time, as this one had with you, they screw up his fear as far as it will go. If their prey is defenseless, knows it's going to die, the gnome senses and feeds the fear. And when the gnome's satisfied, when it really feels good, the victim dies. Sometimes, though, when a human isn't afraid, when he or she has too much self-respect to grovel and shriek, there's nothing in it for the gnome. It has failed to set the victim up for death, see? The time hasn't come. There's no more satisfaction in it for the gnome than killing a tree, which can't show any sign of caring about it."

He took a deep breath. "Sometimes—when it happens like that—the man lives. You must be the bravest girl I ever met."

She laughed. "Brave? I didn't want to die. I kept on looking for ways not to die. That's not courage."

"Maybe not. But I guess you fooled the gnome."

LIFE at Fort Plato went on in an atmosphere of incredible calm.

The Adamites interfered scarcely at all in the normal running of the station. They took comprehensive precautions to ensure that no message from the fort could reveal the true situation to TDC or anyone else. They kept the Terrans away from the wea-

pons, the machines, the laboratories (except under strict supervision), the computers. Beyond that, having once interfered with the running of the routine affairs of the station and finding cause to regret it, they acted almost as guests.

Seven of them spoke English perfectly. The rest of the four hundred picked up the language as any occupying soldiers would.

Wil Slent spent almost all his time with books, records and microfilm. He was a book man, strict, correct. He worked hard. The object of his presence in Fort Plato was to learn all he could about the Terrans and he single-mindedly devoted sixteen hours a day to his task.

Tomi was bored and made no attempt to hide it. There was a stubborn, tacit refusal among almost all theTerrans, young and old, even to say hello to her. They knew the part she had played in the fall of Fort Plato and she became a symbol to them. She was the Adamites; she was their defeat; she was the occupation.

For this reason she saw a lot of John Stewart. She didn't like him and he didn't act as if he liked her. Yet he talked to her, as freely as he would ever talk.

She didn't know why this was and she didn't care. She saw no danger in talking candidly to Stewart.

She was wrong.

FOR the third time Dr. Roger Miller read through all the reports he had been able to assemble on the so-called Maribisans, Don and Gilen Slent.

Everyone in the Personnel Building who had encountered the visitors, however briefly, had been asked to report. The suspicion that they were Adamites was never mentioned.

Certain small, isolated identity factors emerged.

Both of them spoke Enghlish too correctly. Their speech was not always pedantic, their accent not always flawless—certain colloquialisms were used by them. But it was as if someone, not necessarily they themselves, had made a careful study of many examples of the language and what they had been taught was a distillation of these examples.

They clung to each other in a strange way not inconsistent with their being father and daughter—but the relationship seemed more exclusive of others than would be expected of a comparatively young parent from a provincial planet and a lovely girl.

The medical examination showed that the girl had had her appendix removed surgically, but that was not conclusive evidence of alienness—it was quite possible that this operation was still performed on Maribis. Indeed, the medical evidence was rather against the theory that they were

Adamites, for there were confused indications of recent specifically Terran ancestry.

This was particularly puzzling.

Checking failed to confirm or deny that the Slents had arrived on the ship *Nord* from Hylon as they claimed. Their names were on the passenger list, but no one remembered them. That, too, was inconclusive; the vessel was back in space, beyond contact. The few crewmen who had elected not to stay with the ship and hence were available for questioning simply had happened to have nothing to do with these two passengers—who had probably kept to themselves if their present behavior were anything to go by.

One of those who remained, the purser, acted strangely when questioned. No, he didn't remember them —what was the trouble? Why were two passengers so important? He had been in the employ of Spacelines for twenty-nine years and had never been grilled before. Did they think he'd taken a bribe? He insisted on a lie-detector test. (it revealed nothing except that he believed he was telling the truth.) Yes, he had been scheduled to make the next trip on the *Nord*. Only an undiagnosed illness the night before departure had made him miss the trip. The illness had turned out to be an allergy.

Miller stabbed his intercom as if trying to kill it.

"Tell Miss Heilbron I want to see her," he snapped. "No. Ask Miss Heilbron if I may see her. Ask if it would be convenient if I called on her on a matter of considerable importance."

The reply came within forty-five seconds. Miss Heilbron would be honored to receive him. He suspected sarcasm, but he could not complain of the phraseology.

He wasted no time. "Miss Heilbron if our guests are not Adamites they're equally worthy of attention and investigation. I have two suggestions. But first, have you seen the medical report?"

"Yes."

"The medical report is the one thing I find hard to explain."

"Except of course," she suggested gently, "on the basis that the doctors concerned were fools and got it all wrong."

"Naturally I am not ignoring that possibility."

"Naturally not."

"You must rescind your proviso. I may have to meet them myself. At least I must be free to do so if I consider it necessary."

"Of course."

He stared at her. "Of course?"

"I merely wished to make a point, Dr. Miller. We can consider it made, can't we?"

"Wasn't it rather a childish way to make it?"

"Probably. I am a very childish person, Dr. Miller."

"I am trying not to lose my temper. Please do not provoke me."

"You must be mistaken. I'm not generally regarded as highly provocative."

"Understandably," he retorted cruelly and was satisfied by her faint flush. "You agree telepathy must be investigated?"

"I thought hypnosis."

"To hypnotize a person you must be in his presence, or at least in communication with him. In the circumstances, it seems the only means of communication must have been telepathy."

"You mean they worked from outside, from another ship, on the people in the *Nord*?"

"Brilliant, Miss Heilbron. Allow me to congratulate you on your unerring detection of the obvious."

She said nothing, merely looking at him wryly, her expression more telling than words.

"I'm sorry," he said. "All right, I am well aware I'm hard to get on with. I must be the most difficult man in the world to get on with."

"Dr. Miller, I'm sure you exaggerate. Besides," she added kindly, "there are many other worlds."

He swallowed that. "I have a telepathic rating of zero. I intend to enlist a person who calls himself The Great Nicolas."

Miss Heilbron was genuinely surprised. "I grasp your idea, but—isn't he just a mountebank?"

"Probably," said Miller glumly. "But I hope he's not. I most sincerely hope he's not."

THE GREAT NICOLAS was appearing in London, much to the annoyance of Dr. Miller. Nicolas had been in Stuttgart the week before. Miller had to fly to London.

Using the enormous power of Personnel, he had discovered that The Great Nicolas was Nick Grumeyer, one-time conman.

Miller was in the audience in a London night club when the lights dimmed and brass blared to announce The Great Act.

Spotlights picked out three correctly shaped blondes, one in green, one in red, one in blue. Their elaborate costumes contained an enormous quantity of silk, lace, frills and fur, considering how little of their wearers they concealed. The girls turned toward each other, stretching out their spangled arms to form a triangle. Each sank to one knee. The Great Nicolas slowly appeared in the triangle, wearing white evening dress.

The act included illusion as well as telepathy. He snapped his fingers and the girl in red had a blue dress, the one in green a red dress and the one in blue a green dress. He snapped his fingers and each girl became two, then three, then four, swirling out of one another.

There was a lot more of this, which bored Miller because he had not flown to London to see anything of the sort. He didn't know how it was done and he didn't

care.That it was not magic he was certain.

The girls unfastened their enormous skirts and were suddenly dressed in silver leotards. They moved into the audience and lights picked them out as they leaned provocatively over fat men.

"Snakeskin wallet, comb, driving license in name of Andrew Flambert," said Nicolas and a girl produced these items from a man's pocket. "Five keys, a pocket knife, nail scissors— appointment book, handkerchief, pencil—nail varnish, nail file, lipstick—"

It was effective because it was quick, because it was always right and because so many pockets and handbags were probed. Obviously there couldn't be that many stooges in the audience.

You're Nick Grumeyer and I'm here to get you, Miller thought with concentrated venom. *What you stole from me isn't half what you make in a night here, but I know I'll never get that from you. I'll get something else. I'll make you pay in blood, Nick Grumeyer.*

One of the silver girls made a strange genture with a stiff wrist and came toward him. No lights followed her. Nobody but Miller looked at her. There were eleven other girls and Nicolas, who was now telling the audience about their scars.

The silver girl whispered in Miller's ear, "Please come with me, sir."

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

The girl opened a side door, led him along a bare passage and into a dressing room. She faced him.

"Who are you?" she asked.

She was older than he had thought, though not less attractive. Possibly she was sixty, his own age.

He guessed that she was the girls' leader, perhaps even Nicolas's boss.

"You threatened Nick," she said.

The threat had achieved its object. "It was a test," he said. "I'm Dr. Roger Miller of UN. I want to consult The Great Nicolas."

"Why did you threaten him?"

"To see if he could sense the threat."

"Well, he did," she said grimly. "Never fool around with telepathy. It can be a terrible thing."

"Terrible? Do you mean dangerous?"

"That, too. But terrible in other ways. It can turn you inside out."

"You're a telepath, then? And you don't like it?"

"I hate it."

He was interested. "Yet it's your living."

"Nick could manage without me. But he'd use somebody else."

"You're—his wife?"

"Yes. Doris Grumeyer. Now shut up."

"I didn't know he had a wife."

"It is believed we live together. Professionally that's a convenience

at times. Please be quiet. You want to see Nick. He's prepared to see you."

Miller sat down, perfectly prepared to wait. It seemed quite likely now that he had guessed right in deciding to consult The Great Nicolas.

A SECRET meeting was held in Fort Plato. General Morrison knew nothing about it. John Stewart knew nothing about it. Hardly anyone in high authority among the Terrans knew about it—and none of the Adamites.

Former Checker Alan Stewart knew about it and wished he didn't.

His position in Fort Plato after the trial was miserable. Had he been executed he would have been a martyr and might even in time have been turned into a hero. When he was released, however, reaction set in and most of the Terrans in the fort now considered him to be the criminal the Adamites had failed to prove he was. After all, he could have stopped the Adamites and had not done so.

He happened to learn about the meeting and something of its purpose, but was excluded from it. Warned grimly to keep quiet, he almost managed to forget he knew about the matter.

It was not difficult for men and women who knew every inch of the station to find a place where they could talk in secret. Although scanners were everywhere and Adamites were in the checkpoint now, people who knew exactly where the scanners were could defeat them.

It was a meeting of revolutionaries. Inevitably their conclusions were violent and bloody.

Tomi, reading in her room sensed enough disturbance to tell her father that something was in the wind. He told her to go to the checkpoint and see if she could discover anything there.

At the checkpoint, with the help of two Adamite technicians who had been studying the available facilities, she cast her net wide. She looked in and eavesdropped on Morrison, Stewart and many others who were important in Fort Plato. She found nothing to explain her vague sense of danger. She went in search of John Stewart and found him in the main library.

He seemed less interested in her concern than in what had caused it.

"You said it's a feeling?" he asked. "A hunch?"

"I never ignore a hunch. Do you?"

"Tomi, you give the impression this is more than a hunch. Tell me."

She had no intention of telling him that Fort Plato had fallen mainly because Wil Slent and herself had touched a few receptive minds from millions of miles away and made people who were working automatically, thinking of something else, unconsciously

throw a switch here, put a circuit out of operation there, fail to notice that a red light had come on, turn off an alarm.

"I know something's happening."

"You know?"

She had to play it down. "I had this feeling—oh, forget it. What are you reading?"

He showed her the book. It was *The Eden Myth* by Dr. Roger Miller.

"Myth?" she asked. "Eden doesn't exist?"

Stewart smiled. "That's not what the title means. Miller examines the purely Terran sources of the Eden legend and the name itself. The word *eden* is Hebrew and means 'delight'— the Greek version of the Old Testament uses a word *paradeisos*, from the Persian. *Edin* was the Sumerian name for the plain of Babylon. Miller shows that the Adamites never called themselves Adamites—or their world Eden—until they had learned that Terrans had legends that the human race began in a place called the Garden of Eden and that the first man was Adam."

"Well, that's what he would say, isn't it?"

"How do you feel about Earth?"

"I just don't feel anything about Earth. Go back to your book. Who's Miller anyway?"

"He works at UN headquarters in Munich."

"Munich?" She was suddenly thoughtful. "Is that another name for München?"

"Same place."

She turned away. Her feeling of unease had passed. And she still didn't like Stewart. She didn't dislike him either. It was a pity. All the indications were that she would go on being lonely and slightly bored. She was looking forward to the warm, complete contact with her sisters that was to take place in a few hours.

IT DID not take place.

Sal Slent was deeply unconscious on Outward. It had proved necessary, when his foot did not improve after some days, to perform a small surgical operation on it. This was all Tomi could learn.

In München Gilen and Don were together, but Gilen was uneasy rather as Tomi had been; uncommunicative. She broke the contact quickly. Tomi had no chance to ask her what if anything she knew of a Dr. Roger Miller.

In Station 692 Pariss declared briefly and firmly that with a latent telepathic talent around, all such communication had better be suspended, temporarily at least.

Tomi was left with the impression that if her father were not so eager to return to his bookwork, which seemed to occupy him now to the exclusion of all else, she would have been able to make better contact at least with Gilen.

VI

THE guerillas struck in the night.

The Adamites had become careless. Seven days had passed during which the Terrans gave every indication of having accepted the situation reasonably, if not enthusiastically.

If the Terrans had been difficult from the start Adamite control would have been adjusted accordingly. But almost every man, woman and child in the station had behaved carefully right along —like students with a new teacher— and the Adamites had failed to recognize a sizing-up period for what it was.

The guerillas, as they called themselves, let the sentries alone with few exceptions. The Adamites in checkpoint, two men and a woman, were offered poisoned coffee. The three Adamites would not have accepted refreshment from a Terran seven days earlier. No longer suspicious, they drank the coffee and died.

Some sleeping Adamites were slain. The victims were not necessarily important but they could be killed without raising an alarm. Two soldiers who were with Terran girls, contrary to orders, were easy and obvious victims. Tomi and Wil Slent were spared because they were well guarded. Arol, on the other hand, was one of the first victims.

Three Terrans, all girls, knew they were giving their lives—the girl who poisoned the Adamite checkers and the two who slew their lovers. They would be traced later. The others struck secretly, often at men and women they knew not at all. The aim was simply to kill as many Adamites as possible. Many killed more than once.

When a force of four hundred attempted to control a community of five thousand and when, moreover, there was at least a pretense of normalcy, of peaceful occupation if not friendship, a carefully planned coup could be bloodily successful.

The guerillas killed two hundred and one Adamites with no loss to themselves.

The Adamites they could not kill were those who resumed full control of Fort Plato the next morning.

WIL SLENT, dragged rudely back to reality from his fascinating private research, clamped down hard.

All five thousand Terrans were rounded up at gunpoint and locked up, either in large numbers in the halls and storehouses or in their own homes.

Tomi was given the job of compiling a casualty list. As she went her rounds she was sick four times, until at last she could only retch painfully.

The men with Tomi, trained

soldiers, were cool and detached. An Adamite soldier was not trained to be without feelings—he was trained to direct his feelings to maximum effect.

A sergeant remarked at one point, "You have to give them credit. It's a fine job."

Tomi stared at him uncomprehendingly.

The sergeant felt called on to explain. "Well, they couldn't recapture the fort and they accepted that. An effort like this, directed against men on duty, would have been crushed in five minutes. Instead they killed as many of us as they could, as quietly as they could, so that they could go on all night. It was a night of killing. Lovely job."

Tomi could not understand him, but if his words had been translated any guerilla of any nation in history would have understood him at once.

Wil Slent's attitude was different. To lose two hundred men in taking Fort Plato in battle would have been a mere nothing; indeed to take it at all with any loss would have been a remarkable achievement. But to take it with no loss and then allow half the occupying force to be butchered was a grave error.

"If I had a competent second in command," he admitted to Tomi, "it would be my duty to relinquish control to him. But Arol is dead. We have no other senior officer who speaks their language—unless you want to take command?"

"There has to be a Naval commander," Tomi said. "You have to stay in command."

"My tactics were badly mistaken. But how could anyone guess," said Wil, justifying himself, "that any group of reasonable human beings would commit such an act while remaining completely in our power? The situation I set up should in itself have precluded any such possibility. We can draw two hundred replacements from the ship. They'll be here in twelve hours. The Terrans knew they could not overcome us. What could they hope to gain?"

"Self-respect, perhaps," said Tomi. "They simply had to spit in our eye."

"Yes, I have encountered such an attitude in my reading. Of course we must take the usual action. Three for one. Six hundred Terrans must be executed."

Tomi nodded, but so reluctantly that Wil said, "You don't agree? You think it's harsh?"

"I don't think it matters whether it's harsh or not. The point is, is it wise? I suggest you get Stewart here and tell him what you're proposing."

"If I do, there can be no change. It is out of the question for me to declare my intention and not carry it out."

"Then don't tell him your intention. Tell him what you propose

to do and see what happens."

"Very well. But why Stewart? It should be General Morrison."

"Do you want to make it official? Then speak to General Morrison."

"I see. Yes, your idea has merit, Tomi."

When Stewart was told Wil Slent proposed to execute six hundred Terrans, he said, "It will be a long war."

"What do you mean?"

Stewart merely shrugged.

"You think Earth will fight if we do this?"

"Don't you?"

"But no injustice will be committed. You Terrans treacherously fell on us and—"

Stewart laughed without humor. "You attack us, take us over—and don't expect reprisals?"

"You kill two hundred of us and don't expect reprisals?"

Stewart unwrapped a peppermint and sucked it reflectively. "Slent, try to imagine the position exactly reversed. What would Adamites have done?"

"Planned to overthrow you. Adamite officers would never have considered a pointless massacre like this."

"Neither did ours."

"I don't understand you at all."

"You took over the station. You broke up our system of authority, our system of communication. General Morrison has not been in command even of the Terrans in the fort since your coup. It is nonsense to speak of what 'we' did. I know nothing of this. General Morrison knew nothing of it."

"Would you have voted against the massacre if you had had a vote?"

"Certainly."

"On what grounds?"

"Grounds of ethics, expediency, legality and cowardice, among others."

"Cowardice? Fear?"

"Not for myself. But the thought of the galactic war that might follow your doing the criminally stupid thing you propose frightens the life out of me."

"Stewart, two hundred and one of us have been killed. By our laws, as an occupying force, the natural consequence is the execution of six hundred and three of you."

"Any six hundred and three?"

"All the assassins we can establish, plus others selected on a random basis."

"And that's Adamite justice?"

Wil flushed at the sudden biting incredulity in Stewart's tone. He knew, though, that Stewart could suit the tone of his voice to his purpose.

Wil explained: "That's Adamite expediency. Such things must not be allowed to happen again."

"I suggest you forget the whole thing."

For once Stewart had been stupid.

"That's obviously impossible."

"Agreed. Then forget the three-to-one ratio. Terrans used to believe in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Deep down, we still do."

"You mean we must execute only two hundred and one Terrans?"

"I mean nothing of the sort. I mean you must forget the three-to-one ratio."

Wil nodded. "I understand you."

He would not let the discussion go further.

THE Great Nicolas proved to be a smallish man, quite bald, with an impediment in his speech of which there was no sign when he was on stage.

Doris remained in the room while he and Miller talked. She said nothing. She watched Miller steadily all the time.

Grumeyer's manner was friendlier than his wife's. Miller easily understood why he had been a successful conman.

"This is very interesting," Grumeyer said. "But you have nothing to go on but guesses? The man and girl you tell me about may be Adamites—and may be telepaths?"

Miller nodded. "You as a telepath," he said with some asperity, "should have no difficulty in checking on the latter possibility."

"Not very much," Grumeyer agreed. "But I imagine you don't want these two alerted?"

"You imagine correctly."

"That makes it more difficult."

"You are a telepath?" Miller asked bluntly.

Grumeyer smiled. "I should have thought that has been clearly established."

"One thing puzzles me. Scientists and psychologists still know very little about telepathy. Yet you have a telepathic act. And there are others. Why can't the scientists establish anything definite? Why don't they test you?"

"I have been approached. Scientists always wish to study a thing under their conditions. They think up the test, set up the experiment and believe before it starts that it must be a good test because they have thought it up. This is rather like ruling that the best tennis player is the one who can hit most balls through a hole in the wall. Something is tested, but what? Certainly not the ability to win matches."

"I see what you mean. I've heard you once were a good swindler."

"Ah, that. I will explain. I had a miserable childhood, Doctor. I was genuinely misunderstood. I did not know that I was different, you see. Suddenly, when I was about fifteen, everything changed. I found it was easy to make people give me things. I could tell when I was pleasing them and when I was making them angry. I soothed

them until they wanted to give me something. Girls, too."

His eyes flickered briefly to Doris, who did not move.

"My wife knows this. Even now women flock to me. I'm an ugly little man, yet women beg me not only for love but for anything else I care to give them. That is how I became what you call a swindler. The choice was not mine. The profession was forced on me by my victims. At the time I could find nothing else I could do successfully. It was only when I met Doris that—"

He paused, then said more briskly, "There is one thing about telepathy the scientists find hard to believe and therefore make no attempt to prove—it is a collaborative talent. Just as mindreading demands a mind to read and a mind to be read, two people can form a partnership many times more effective than any individual can be. These two are not the same, do not have the same functions. There is the fulcrum and the lever. Although the two individuals who form a team do not have to be man and wife, it does seem essential for them to be of different sexes. I have been able to meld with many women, but never really successfully with a man."

"You work—meld, you say—with all the girls in your act?"

"It's hard to say yes or no. There are no words for what scientists investigate but refuse to believe. I meld invariably and easily with Doris. I—well, contact the other girls."

"To return to the man and girl who call themselves Maribisans—"

"Yes, it's interesting that they are a man and girl—interesting, too, that they claim to be father and daughter."

"Claim to be?"

"They may very well be so. My thought was merely that they would do so anyway. They would call themselves father and daughter, husband and wife or brother and sister because telepathic partnership demands proximity."

Miller leaned forward, interested. "It doesn't work over distances?"

"That's not what I mean at all. The partners have to be close, preferably within sight of each other. It's no use having a fulcrum here and a lever somewhere else."

"I see. Another point occurs to me. One would imagine telepaths would sense other telepaths."

"Yes."

"Could the man and girl in München sense you as a more than usually talented telepath?"

"No."

"You are very definite."

Grumeyer opened a drawer. He produced a piece of apparatus that resembled a primitive crystal set for the reception of radio signals.

"Like many discoveries, this was made by accident," said Grumeyer.

"Exactly what it does or why, I neither know nor care. I know its effect, which is all that matters. In the past we suffered interference. Mental interference. Thoughts from outside, thoughts we did not want. Probably my particular mental activity interested, stimulated, attracted similar mental activity."

He placed the device back where he had found it, but did not close the drawer.

"I discovered this apparatus by chance, as I told you. It has some kind of shorting or limiting effect. I set it before every performance. Although it does not interfere significantly with the act, it prevents telepaths far away from becoming interested."

"Similar to jamming radio signals?"

"Yes. Similar. But unlike jamming, it does not draw attention to itself. I call it the Blanket."

"Mr. Grumeyer, are you going to help me?"

"By going to München? No."

"Any reasonable expenses—"

"Not a matter of money. If what you say is true I fear these people. Damage can easily be done in a mind. We all have a secret fear. I shall tell you mine —fear of being physically sound and mentally crippled."

"So you won't help?"

"I did not say that either." He hesitated and finally said, "This I will promise you. If you learn that these two are enemies of our race, if you can honestly say they are dangerous—immediately dangerous, not potentially dangerous—ask me again and I may come."

With that Miller had to be content. The Great Nicolas would go no further. And Doris merely looked at him silently.

"WONDERLAND?" Pariss asked.

"You've never heard of our Wonderlands?"

She puckered her brows in thought. "I've heard of a book, *Alice in Wonderland*—"

"Our Wonderlands are not quite like that, though there are similarities. Alice saw her Wonderland in a dream. We visit ours fully awake."

"And you want me to come with you? Hugh, give me your word this isn't a trick."

"What kind of trick?" he asked. "Wonderland is made up entirely of tricks. Nearly all the tricks we know are incorporated in it somewhere."

She laughed. "Where is it? We didn't find it when we checked the station."

"You probably thought it was just ballast."

"Exactly what is it?"

"A mixture of simulation and illusion and a little reality. For a few hours you'll be on Earth, in circumstances I know but you don't. It's better if you don't know.

Often when we use it ourselves, we have someone else set the program for us."

"The station is small. There can't be much room for this Wonderland."

"More than you'd think. A certain mass is necessary for various reasons. If we didn't have a Wonderland, the space it takes up would be filled with ballast."

"What's it for?"

"Mainly to help keep us sane. To stop us from feeling too homesick."

She was becoming curious. If Wonderland simulated conditions on Earth it was her duty to visit it.

They went up from the living quarters in a slow elevator.

"How many can be in Wonderland at once?" she asked.

"Two at most settings. Four in some simple, static scenes. Only one in some complicated simulations."

"And we just walk in? No preparation?"

"Usually we change our clothes. That's all. Wonderland does the rest."

The elevator stopped. They emerged in a blank steel corridor facing a double door. Beyond the door was a small totally bare room with two more doors.

"Go in there and change," said Hugh. "Then come out."

Pariss found herself in a cubicle. Set out for her in front of a chute, with automated neatness, was a curious collection of garments: a blue insulated suit with a hood, boots with skates and a collection of equipment the purpose of which she had to guess.

It was going to be cold. There would be snow and ice. She was used to this. Eden was a cold world except on the artificial islands.

She changed quickly and picked up the strange equipment she was evidently supposed to take with her. Then she left the cubicle.

"Like it?" Hugh asked.

She was dazzled by the bright sun on the sparkling snow. Over to the left, about a thousand meters away, was a forest of green spiky trees. In front of her the ground fell gently to a frozen lake. To the right were blue mountains hazy with distance.

She caught her breath—and not from the cold. The air was clean and invigorating. Her breath froze and drifted away slowly, indicating hardly any wind.

"How is it done?" she murmured.

"Oh, don't bother about that. Can you skate?"

The illusion, if such it was, was perfect. The snow was crisp and new, with no footprints but their own. The sky was clear light blue.

They left their skis by the changing rooms—which looked part of an Alpine hut—and trudged down to the lake, where they helped each other to put on skates.

Pariss skated well, but slightly

to her chagrin Hugh skated better. The Terran attitude toward snow and ice was new to her. On Eden they were an inconvenience and all paths and roads were kept completely clear. Children and adults exercised and trained in the snow, but only young children played in it. One skated to get somewhere or for exercise, not for fun.

She enjoyed skating with Hugh and soon learned some of his techniques. Previously she would have seen no point in skating backward or on one skate only except when changing over to the other.

Hugh also learned quietly from what was new to Pariss.

If there should be war between Terrans and Adamites, on the surface of worlds, it was important to know where the Adamites held an advantage. They might strike first at Northern Canada, Alaska, Russia, even the polar caps— if they had been applying technology to snow and ice for centuries while Earth people for the most part had merely played in it or waited for a thaw.

FOR the first time, as she smoothed on the long gold dress she next found in the changing cubicle, Pariss had a fleeting glimpse of what clothes meant to Terran women. But the feeling was gone in a flash.

Once again she gasped in wonder and admiration as she emerged, this time into a brightly lit ballroom in which scores of people were dancing.

This, she knew at once, was a Grand Ball, a great occasion.

The music was strange to her ears, although she had listened dutifully to taped Terran music. The beat, however, was obvious— one, two, three, one, two, three. This was what they called a waltz. The magnificently dressed dancers were bobbing gracefully in simple steps which Pariss, a good dancer, was able to pick up in a few seconds.

The men were all in black and white, the women in all the colors of the rainbow. Hugh appeared, dressed like the other men in a black suit with a dazzling white shirt and a white tie.

"May I have the pleasure?" he asked.

The illusion was nearly perfect. Once or twice she tried to touch the other dancers, but they always moved gently away.

"Those drinks they're carrying can't be real," she said.

"No, but you can have one if you like."

"How?"

"I'll show you."

He went to the buffet and returned with two glasses. She noticed that people moved easily out of his way.

She drank and danced with Hugh again, less successfully,

because the steps were more elaborate than those of the waltz.

She turned down Hugh's invitation to go out on the balcony. She was not sure what she would do if he became even friendlier.

So they went back to the doors from which they had emerged and once again she was in the bare changing cubicle.

The clothes she found this time were unexpected. After the snow and the ballroom, she had expected the next scene to be even more glamorous and probably aphrodisiac—perhaps a luxury apartment high above a city, late at night, with wine and supper. She was hungry and would have welcomed the supper.

But the clothes she found were coarse trousers and tunic, with underclothes so plain and utilitarian she knew there could be no glamor in the next scene.

She dressed and hesitated, reluctant this time to go out, remembering that after all Hugh was—or might consider himself to be—an enemy.

HAVING gone so far, Wil Slent would budge no further. Two hundred and one Adamites had been killed. Two hundred and one Terrans had to die. And since it would be impossible to establish the identity of all the assassins, the two hundred and one would be selected at random, every twenty-fifth name on the personnel list in alphabetical order, excluding only those under eighteen.

The execution of two hundred Terrans must go on.

It did.

It was done as humanely as possible. The Terrans were sent to lunch one day in groups of two hundred. One group was never seen again.

Among those who were executed were General Morrison, whose name was selected at random from the list, and the wife of the chief medical officer, Nils Hakstrott. Previously he, like Stewart, had been as neutral as possible in the circumstances, prepared to sit out the Adamite occupation. When his wife, who was at least half the taciturn Scandinavian's life, was executed—the gentle Delise had been the last person among the five thousand Terrans likely to kill any human being under any circumstances—Nils Hakstrott decided coldly that he personally was going to avenge her.

THE Outwarders were friendly in an earthy way and Red was typical. The women accepted Verne with neither enthusiasm nor resentment. She was there—and that was that. The men made crude advances, which stopped abruptly when Red made it clear she was already claimed.

She was given a desk and told to copy a plan. It was an apparently easy job with several pitfalls. She

did her very best and her boss, a vast man called Eric Manvin, was satisfied and said so.

He showed his satisfaction by putting her at once on a difficult job, a defense network soon to be established against raids by the gnomes and hemmers. It consisted of a central fort and a series of boundary outposts linked to the fort by both surface and underground tunnels. The specifications and requirements were supplied and it was up to her to solve the many problems.

She worked with three men and two women. The range of work was immense; everything that required plans was handled here.

At the first break for coffee she told Eric, "I've met your brother."

"Fred?"

"We were on the road in the gale, my father and I. He came out for us. He saved our lives."

Eric seemed reluctant to talk about Fred. Presently he said, "Fred doesn't have all his onions, girl."

"All his what?"

"You know. There's something missing in him. Ma was nearly killed by a hemmer while she was carrying him. Doctors say that shouldn't have anything to do with it, but I don't know. Fred's scared of nothing but hemmers'"

Verne thought of the stocky bluff gateman. As she formed a casual mental contact she became aware of something urgent.

She didn't stop to think. "The gate!" she exclaimed.

She whirled to claw at the door and found Eric there before her. "Fred?" he asked.

They ran. The gate was perhaps three hundred meters from the drawing office. On the way they collected three other men. One had a shotgun.

When they burst into the gatehouse a hemmer was sucking the last drop of blood from the body of Fred Manvin. The hemmer was about the size of a large dog and roughly the same shape, but the six legs and head were amorphous, like those of the gnomes. The long tongue was the hemmer's strike weapon.

The shotgun went off over Verne's shoulder. The hemmer, not disabled, turned and lashed at Eric with its tongue. Eric sawed savagely and successfully in the air with his knife. The tip of the tongue, almost severed, dripped blood—Fred's blood.

The four men knew what to do. The man with the shotgun threw it away. They fell on the hemmer with knives and whatever heavy objects came to hand—clubs, a lamp, a steel rod.

They beat the hemmer to a pulp. That this was necessary was shown by its struggles and the vicious lashing of its tongue after its owner should have been dead. There was red blood and green blood. The red blood was Fred's.

the green the hemmer's.

The creature was reduced to small green-brown balls. One of the men looked around and found a small blowlamp which he applied to the residue. It did not burn easily and tended to roll away. He rolled all the balls outside, turned up the flame and incinerated them. Only a little black dust was left.

Eric was looking down at Fred, a strange expression on his face. He showed no sorrow. What he felt Verne thought, was shame.

"Poor Fred," said Eric. "He was never afraid of anything but hemmers."

After Fred's bloodless corpse had been taken away to be disposed of, Eric and the other men looked around to see where the hemmer had come from —an important matter, Verne understood. They found a small gap in the fence near the gate, where something heavy had been dashed violently in the storm.

"That's it," Eric said. "The beast saw the gap, crept through, waited behind the gatehouse until Fred opened the door, then jumped him. It had the sense to kill him inside where nobody could see what was going on." It was only then that he reverted to the most remarkable feature of the affair. "How did you know, girl?" he asked, fixing her with his hard gaze.

Verne could tell him only a part of the truth.

"I've never seen a hemmer before," she said, "but I think I can tell when they're about."

To her relief, Eric nodded. "Some people have claimed the gift—usually about gnomes. But you can't sense gnomes, can you? You once walked in on one."

"Now I might be able to."

He shook his head. "Don't count on it, girl. Anyone I ever heard of who claimed to be able to sense gnomes or hemmers was killed by one or the other. Maybe it works sometimes. When you start thinking it always works you get careless and—" He made a gruesome sucking noise, looked at her curiously. He had shown not one sign of grief over Fred. "Things happen around you, girl. Be careful. You're a good draftsman. I don't want to lose you."

TWICE Pariss had emerged into a blaze of light. This time she found herself in a world of blackness, sudden flashes, noise and menace.

Hugh caught her arm. She could scarcely see him. A searchlight flicked on, then off. She had a glimpse of tall buildings all around her. The droning she had noted almost unconsciously came from the sky. The *crumps* which vibrated the air about her ears and shook the ground under her feet could only be explosions.

As her eyes became accustomed

to the scene she discovered that there was really a good deal of light, particularly to her left, where a red glow lit the sky. And as her ears learned to discriminate she found that the street was not deserted, as she had thought. Many people were scurrying in the black shadows.

A man in a steel helmet emerged from the gloom, clearly visible as the red glow over the rooftops suddenly swelled to flames.

"Get off the street," he yelled. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Pariss and Hugh sought shadows and found a narrow opening, a mere lane. They hurried along it, more to get away from the bawling man than anything else. As they went, they heard him shouting at somebody else.

At the other end of the lane they found themselves in a more open space. Abruptly all was brightly lit—at least a score of searchlights came on, searching for and finding a dark winged shape droning over the city. They saw bombs drop. Then the bomber changed course and the searchlights lost it. They caught a smaller plane, evidently one of the defenders, for the lights flicked off again and the darkness seemed ten times greater than before.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"In London in an air raid. Not contemporary. This was centuries ago."

"Why—"

A building no more than two hundred meters away opened out and collapsed and Hugh threw her to the ground. There was no flash, but the noise deafened Pariss. She hit the ground and Hugh landed heavily on top of her. She was angry—this was only play-acting.

However, as her back was spattered with small stones and she felt a fierce blast of hot air over her, she wasn't so sure.

"This is a hot spot," said Hugh, pulling her to her feet. "Let's get out of it."

She tried to protest, but he was dragging her so fast she had to save her breath for running.

They came to a blazing store. Firemen were hosing the buildings nearby, ignoring the doomed structure. In the street were scores of dazed people in nightclothes, some grotesquely wearing steel helmets and pajamas, most carrying gas masks. A child dashed at Pariss and then dodged away.

A breath of wind sighed along the street and the next moment they were drenched in cold water. The water supply for the hoses had suddenly been cut and the weak jets were blown back on the firefighters. The water, at least, was real.

The droning swelled. As searchlights stabbed the sky again Pariss caught glimpses of whole waves of bombers.

The heat from the fire was burn-

ing her face. Although she still resented the futility of this demonstration, she turned and ran to the other side of the street as she heard a child wailing.

She didn't find the child and she lost Hugh.

The blazing building suddenly collapsed into the street, a terrifying sight, engulfing the firemen and the homeless people in blazing rubble.

Not believing in the still flickering debris in front of her, she started to approach it to prove to herself it was illusion. The heat drove her back.

Still annoyed with Hugh, she decided to make her way back, leaving him to follow. There would be a door, as usual, looking like a typical door in this beleaguered city, but opening into the cubicle.

She could not find the way back. When she thought she had found the lane, it proved to be the wrong lane. Instead of retracing her steps she tried to find the street they had started from. Soon she was hopelessly lost.

Because she was uneasy, hungry, wet and cold and because she was alone and could see no way out of this ghastly illusion she began to curse Hugh. It had been pleasant and interesting to skate, to dance. What pleasure was there in this?

When she was approaching despair, for the noise alone made her want to scream, she realized she was in a place very like the street where the man in the tin hat had shouted at her and Hugh. She searched all around for the door out of this tortured city.

She could not find it. No door would open for her. Trying to remember exactly what had happened when she first found herself in this whirl of destruction, she could be sure of nothing except that Hugh had guided her. Without him she was lost.

As she turned from another doorknob which almost certainly led nowhere anyway, she bumped into someone.

"Pariss!" said Hugh. "What happened to you when the building collapsed?"

"Never mind that. Let's get out of here."

Still angry with him, she was torn between relief at finding him, the desire to flare at him and impatience to escape from this mad, hellish world. The last was most important. Telling him what she thought of him could wait.

"We can't leave at this moment. We've got to go through that lane and it's blocked."

"Get me out of here!" she said, not loudly, but with passion.

"The raid will be over in an hour or less. Then it'll be easy to get back where we started. I've found a workmen's hut. We can wait there. This way."

Her nerves were in rags. She wanted to scream at him.

A door opened. She was led

inside. A match scraped and she saw the inside of the hut.

In one corner was a spade, in another a pick. Hugh was lighting an oil lamp. Two small windows had black material draped over them. On the bare boards of the floor lay a thin paillasse. Two chipped mugs, an old kettle, a small stove and a spoon lay on an inverted fishbox. There was nothing else.

She exploded hysterically. She didn't know what she said. For the first time she lost some of her perfect English and used Adamite words.

Hugh smiled and she threw herself at him. He caught her wrists and kissed her and suddenly she admitted what she had known all along, that she wanted this man.

All that mattered was: did he care about her as something other than an Adamite adversary. If he remained coldly calculating she would punish him.

It was she who dragged him down. He was startled, then enthusiastically cooperative. She said what was in her mind.

"Forget I'm an Adamite. If you don't care about me as a woman I'll kill you."

FULL contact was made after five exploratory efforts. It was easy to arrange full concentration in the two stations, but Gilen and Don had difficulty making sure they would be alone and undisturbed—and Verne could be in Sal's company only in the presence of other patients.

TOMI—Wil—*Fort Plato:* There is a very serious situation here, tragic and possibly disastrous [Details of massacre and reprisals]. A strong line must be taken with the Terrans on all fronts...

VERNE—Sal—*Outward:* Nonsense. How can we take a strong line here? Tomi, are you sure the execution of the Terrans was necessary?

TOMI: Wil took the decision. He felt he had no choice.

GILEN—Don—*München:* We are in the Terrans' hands. We are almost helpless. It may be necessary to request permission to use our special abilities if we are to achieve anything at all.

PARISS—Far—*Station 692:* Hugh and I [communication not in words].

TOMI, VERNE, GILEN: [Shock, alarm, interest.]

TOMI: Are you sure you haven't been tricked, Pariss?

PARISS: Perhaps. It's of no consequence.

TOMI: No consequence! When you hold a secret that—

PARISS: I don't care

about that now. Hugh has quite considerable telepathic potential, but there is no risk whatever that he will develop further without being trained. I could train him, I think—

TOMI: Pariss, you must not!

PARISS: Oh, I won't. Don't get the idea I've changed sides.

GILEN: We are no longer together. We have lost our bond.

VERNE: That's natural. Experience must change us—and our present experiences are very different. Tomi, it's a great pity such decisive and irrevocable action has been taken.

PARISS: Especially without consultation. It may mean ruin.

VERNE: I find Terrans pretty good people. I have found no reason to fight them. Here on Outward the settlers are totally indifferent to Eden. From my experiences, I have no reason to back any Adamite aggression against Terrans.

GILEN: I think perhaps only by fighting could we get what we want. But I think we would lose . . .

TOMI: We must try to agree. There must be an answer . . .

VERNE: How can we agree on an answer when the problems are not the same?

THE rivulets mingled with more turbulence than ever before. Verne was the most decisive, the most positive. Gilen was the most tentative. Pariss was the most complex; the others sensed her conflict and at the same time a new serenity and smugness in her that irritated them. Tomi, once she found that a strong line in her post was favored by nobody, began to question Wil's action more than she had done previously. She broke the contact because she wanted to think.

VII

FORT Plato was seething. The executions had united the Terrans as nothing else could have done.

Previously there had been many cautious spirits. The retaliatory executions, in which by rough Terran estimate about ten guerillas had been included with one hundred and ninety innocent people, changed all that.

On the face of it, how the Terrans felt had ceased to matter. They were now treated as a conquered garrison. When not working or eating they were locked in their rooms. Large-scale plotting was made virtually impossible. The replacement Adamites, who

had not known the easy mingling of the first few days, were tough jailers. To them the Terrans were dangerous and treacherous enemies.

When a small Terran group went berserk, a dozen men rushing a single Adamite, he did not shoot to kill. There was no more killing. He stunned them and the offenders were taken off in a tender to the Adamite ship, which no Terran had ever been allowed to visit and return.

WHEN Dr. Miller returned to München a message from Miss Heilbron was waiting for him.

> Dear Dr. Miller:-
>
> Please come and see me immediately. It's vitally important.
>
> Naturally I cannot act without first seeing you.
>
> Yours faithfully,
> Margaret Heilbron

He smiled a wintry smile.

She had a flat near the *Prinzregententheater*. He knew the address but had never been there. She opened the door to him herself. The warmth of her welcome took him aback.

Searching suspiciously for irony in her attitude as she brought him a drink, he admitted reluctantly to himself that possibly her friendliness was genuine. She lounged easily and elegantly on the arm of a chair, a drink in her hand.

"Do you remember the purser on the *Nora?* The report on him?

"Very well. I read it a dozen times. Norman Glück."

"Good. He seems to have missed a trip for medical reasons and had to be cleared medically. The doctors became interested in the psychriatric angle—"

"So were we all," said Miller. "But he refused to cooperate."

"Ah, you weren't in the fortunate position of being his employers. The company doctors refused to pass him until he completed any treatment they chose. Now it seems his vehement insistence on certain 'facts' has convinced the doctors that they must be untrue."

Miller nodded. "That he harbored certain emotional beliefs was obvious."

"The man and the girl we are interested in were not on the ship when it started from Hylon. They were not on it a week out of München. They *were* on it six days out."

"The ship didn't stop in space?"

"Impossible. I mean, if there had been some kind of rendezvous in space, even one nobody saw or remembered afterward, the time and fuel schedules would reveal it. That is, unless a ship nobody saw matched velocity with the *Nord* and somehow managed a transfer."

"Thank you, Miss Heilbron. You've given me a key."

"To what?"

"To open a door, obviously." He could reach her phone without getting up. He used it to send a wire to The Great Nicolas. Its purport was: *We need you. Please come.*

WHEN Sal Slent left the hospital he took Fred Manvin's job as gatekeeper for the time being. Great mobility was not required.

Verne remained with Red, although she could have moved in with one of the single women. She continued to keep him at arm's length. She knew that coarse jokes were being made about the situation. Red was surprisingly and uncharacteristically tolerant of the ribbing. He made no secret of his determination to have Verne in the end.

She found it hard even to be sure she liked him. She went on living in his house principally because she was used to him. Only once, when he came home drunk, did he try to force himself on her. She dislocated his shoulder with a judo lock he had never encountered. He bore no malice; everyone had a right to defend himself—or herself. Anyway, she put the shoulder back in place for him.

They met after work each day and went home together. This became habit and, one day when Red was delayed a little, Verne found she didn't want to go home without him. She waited outside although quite heavy rain was falling. When he appeared he seemed surprised she had waited.

"Sorry, baby," he said. "I couldn't help it. Busy. Don't bawl me out."

"I never bawl you out."

"No, you don't, do you? except when I swear."

"Swearing is untidy. It's not washing your face or not putting on a clean shirt."

"Never thought of it that way, baby. Look, I got a haunch of steak. Not tinned steak. Frozen, but thawing out nicely now. We're going to have the best dinner we've had in months."

She expressed natural interest. "Where did it come from?"

"Base settlement up north has started a cattle farm. It hasn't been tried before because everybody thought the gnomes and hemmers would go for the cattle—and it's a big enough job protecting animals from the climate without trying to protect them from gnomes and hemmers as well. But finally some cattle were brought in and the gnomes ignore them. So do the hemmers."

"That's strange."

"Maybe not. We've never managed to keep a gnome in captivity—they either get away or kill themselves. But we know that for meat they eat only humans or other gnomes."

Verne shuddered. Eden had no history of cannibalism, and she found the idea even more shocking than Terrans did.

"Seems that—like some cannibals in our own history—they believe you become what you eat."

They reached the house and were soaked to the skin.

Verne hesitated.

Red looked at her inquiringly.

"Red," she said quietly, "there's something in the house."

Red was instantly alert. "Hemmer?"

"I don't know."

He took a whistle from his pocket, the general alarm. "Want me to blow this?"

"No—I'm not sure enough."

He nodded. When there was an alarm in Camp Eleven everybody dropped everything and ran to the spot. If it was a false alarm the people responsible looked uncommonly foolish.

"I'll get a gun," Red said and moved to the alarm post only twenty yards away.

"It's a gnome," she said. "The same one."

"You don't know for sure there's anything there—but you know it's the same one?"

Red's tone was not mocking. He was genuinely seeking information, at least clarification of her hunch.

"It couldn't be the same one, could it? The house was checked top and bottom after—"

"Gnomes are cunning, baby, and yours hates you. Maybe he found another way back. We have to have ventilation, and gomes can flow like water. You stay behind me."

He opened the front door no more quietly nor loudly than his custom, strode in as usual.

"Kitchen," Verne whispered.

Red kicked the kitchen door open, not entering the room.

The gnome was in the center of the floor as before. Its arms lashed out, hit the walls on each side of the doorway. Gnomes tended to flail rather than project their arms. Except for the split-second delay, the gnome might have reached Red.

Red blasted the creature and moved closer, cutting it up with his beam. It took a long time to die. The killing was messier than that of the hemmer. Pieces of gnome were not harmless like those of the other murderous species. If they happened to have a few brain cells the pieces went on fighting.

After the gnome was killed the kitchen had to be cleaned. When the job was done, Verne said, "Let's put the steak away for tonight, Red. I couldn't eat it. I couldn't even cook it."

Red nodded understandingly.

Verne suddenly sensed strongly that Red loved her. Her courage in the previous encounter with the gnome had won him over completely—since then he had acted as

he had never acted before, waiting patiently for her because he was completely certain that she was worth waiting for.

And Verne discovered in a blinding flash the difference it made to a girl to know that she was loved.

She held out her arms to him.

"I'D TELL you anything, Hugh," Pariss said, troubled, "if it didn't make me a traitress."

He nodded. They were lying naked on a sunny beach in Wonderland. This was not only the most romantic setting they had been able to find—it was also the most private.

"You're worried," he said. "You feel something's gone wrong. Look, Pariss—I don't want to make you betray your people. If you did that, they'd execute you, wouldn't they?"

"Yes. But I might not be there to let them do it."

He thought that over for a long time. At last he said "I see. I'm glad. The trouble is—we might execute you."

"If I chose to stay?"

"Well, it would depend on what had happened. You said there were four echelons. Pariss, I can be pretty impartial. Maybe I can help. Don't betray your people, but tell me what's worrying you."

"Yes, I will. In Fort Plato, two hundred Terrans and two hundred Adamites have died. And not in battle."

"That's bad," said Hugh quietly.

"It's very bad. I know."

"Can you tell me how?"

"Oh, revolt and reprisal. The Terrans killed first."

Hugh sat up, staring out across the unreal sea. "That may help. You've told me the truth about the purpose of this operation? You just want to find out about us?"

She was silent.

"So there's more."

She sat up too, suddenly clutching his arm. "Hugh, I want to tell you. If I could only believe it was for the good of all of us—"

"Can't you tell me about the three other parts of this operation? We're bound to learn about them in the end. Isn't that so?"

She nodded.

At first hesitantly, then more freely, she told him of the quadruplets—Wil, Far, Don and Sal—and about Wil's quadruplet daughters: Tomi, Gilen, Verne and herself.

Hugh listened quietly, asking hardly any questions.

"So that was the background at Fort Plato," he said at last. "Your father acted exactly as your uncle did here. There was no proper Adamite control. The massacre happened because it was allowed to happen. Pariss, you're heading for failure—catastrophic failure."

He spoke with such conviction that she went suddenly pale.

"Failure?"

"I could take this station over again in one hour."

"You swear that, Hugh? It's not a trick? But why are you telling me?"

"Because," he said slowly, "I'm going to save you if I can."

CONTACT was easier now that Sal was out of the hospital.

VERNE — Sal — *Outward:* I've gone a step further than Pariss. I've married Red.

TOMI—Wil—*Fort Plato:* Verne, you're crazy!

VERNE: Maybe. Wasn't it a lot crazier to execute two hundred Terrans?

TOMI: Perhaps. Stewart thinks I should have stopped that somehow. Anyway, we're clamping down now.

PARISS — Far — *Station 692:* Hasn't there been too much clamping down already? Hugh says he's scared to think about what's going to happen on Fort Plato.

TOMI, GILEN, VERNE: You've told him? You've told him everything?

PARISS: No. Not about our main aim. But he has told me many things. We'll all be lucky just to escape.

TOMI: Nonsense. These Terrans aren't so marvelous.

GILEN: For my part, I would be prepared to leave now.

PARIS, VERNE, TOMI: Without the seed?

GILEN: If you let us make a maximum effort, we might escape with the seed.

TOMI: Wait. Wait. This is panic. Our control here is absolute—

PARISS: That's what you think.

TOMI: Pariss, find out all you can, but do not touch Hugh's mind. Gilen, plan to steal what we want, if necessary by maximum effort, but don't act until I give the word. Verne—

VERNE: Yes, shy virgin, what advice for me?

TOMI: None.

IT WAS only a convenient pretense that Stewart, Terran liaison officer after the death of General Morrison, had any real authority. The Adamites were able to bring minor offenders before him and, as often as not, he was permitted to decide what was to be done. Leaders of the various sections into which the Terrans had been divided reported to him regularly.

A girl who reported on the stenographer section gave him a paper to sign and with it was a small slip, reading:

YOU WILL BE HURT BY AN ELEVATOR DOOR. DO NOT LET THE STRANGERS TREAT YOU.

The girl made a slight gesture and he understood he was to eat the paper at the earliest opportunity.

His reaction was mainly exasperation. The first plot had been disastrous. The massacres had accomplished nothing to the advantage of anyone. Here was another melodramatic plan.

It was not difficult to get the crumpled rice paper into his mouth with a peppermint and swallow it.

Two hours later, going for lunch, he had to descend two floors. He had a strong impulse to use the stairs. However, he would probably not be allowed to evade this thing even if he wanted to. He took the elevator.

He entered with no trouble and was rather hoping the plan had already collapsed. When his floor was reached he was gently but firmly pushed back by the others in the elevator, so that he was last to emerge. The gate closed on his foot.

He tried to cry out exactly as he would have done if he had had no warning at all. Two Adamite guards turned quickly and brought up their guns. The door slid open again. He pitched forward.

The Adamites knew who he was. They called their own medical officer to attend to him.

Stewart's foot was badly bruised, but not seriously crushed.

A Terran clinic orderly turned up, looked at the foot casually and said Stewart should go to the clinic.

The three Adamites spoke no English between them. They sent for an interpreter. Tomi came.

"Very funny, isn't it?" Stewart asked.

Tomi, who had not smiled, started in surprise. A quality Stewart had not previously revealed was peevishness.

Stewart's tactics succeeded admirably. Instead of being sympathetic, instead of insisting that he get the best Adamite care, she shrugged and left him to his bad temper and the Terran clinic.

For two hours after he reached the clinic nothing happened that was not entirely routine. His foot was treated. The two Adamite guards in the clinic seldom entered the two small wards.

At last the chief medical officer, Nils Hakstrott, came to see him. Hakstrott said, "Sorry, Stewart, but we had to get you in here somehow. The last gesture of defiance, I presume you agree, was cretinous. This one is designed to defeat the Adamites utterly."

At Stewart's inquiring look he explained: "Oh, yes, we can talk here. These clinics are prefabricated, so the scanners were added afterward. The one in here has been out of order for three months and we've made sure the Adamites

never had a chance to install one of their own. Stewart, I want you to understand first of all that the present scheme is worlds apart from the earlier one. All the top men except yourself have already been consulted. It's a plan, not a pious hope."

"With the object of recapturing Fort Plato?"

"Yes. Their ship may attack us in retaliation, but we hope to be ready for that."

"The facts, please."

"Yes. Perhaps you don't know it, but I was formerly in Chemical Warfare."

Stewart had not known—and that was good, because it meant few people did.

"Before the unfortunate massacre I had ideas of my own—they had come to nothing. But now, the Adamites have murdered my wife. Perhaps you wonder if I can be trusted to be rational. Well, rather to my personal disappointment, the plan does not involve the death of many Adamites, maybe none."

Stewart merely nodded.

"I managed to examine and test several of the Adamite devices they rely on to ensure that the air is not tampered with, the water, their food. Quite effective, all of them. They would give the alarm at once. But every such device is a challenge."

"And you've found a way to beat the devices?"

Hakstrott was not to be hurried. "There's a way of buffering drugs," he said ruminatively, "to delay their effect and make it cumulative. You take them at two o'clock and they don't even begin to work until six. When you start assimilating them, nothing happens. The drug continues to build up until, perhaps, you have a lethal dose inside you and you still don't keel over. Using certain drugs and certain buffering agents, I can arrange that the victims will suspect nothing—because there are no symptoms—until what seems like ordinary fatigue overwhelms them."

"And this is the treatment you prescribe for the Adamites?"

"Yes. The difficulty is making sure they'll take it."

"I can see that might be a difficulty."

"Our only practical solution is to take it with them."

"That's practical?"

"I told you I examined their warning devices. We can't directly contaminate their food supplies. Naturally they thought of that. But we can drug the water and their devices won't detect the drug."

"How far has this gone?" Stewart asked. "And exactly why am I being consulted?"

"You are to approve," said Hakstrott gently.

"I am to approve. Mind if I ask why?"

"So that we are all in this together. Unlike the idiocy. How

far has it gone? It can be set in motion at any time."

"And the chances of success?"

"Excellent. The drug will be administered in the water used for cooking and the water from which beverages are prepared. The schedule will be such that people will get tired at just about the time when they would normally expect to get tired."

"I see." And Stewart did see. As Hakstrott claimed, this plan was quite different from the guerillas' revolt.

To annoy a dangerous enemy without incapacitating him only made future action more difficult, perhaps impossible.

To defeat a dangerous enemy with one stroke was a brilliant success.

Adamites were predictable. They still judged Terrans by themselves.

Without prompting, Stewart was able to see the further implications of the plan. Of course the night-shift Adamites would be asleep and would not be affected. Fortunately the Adamites, like Terrans, kept only a skeleton staff on night duty. It was the duty of the day-staff Adamites to enforce the curfew, herd the Terrans in the fort into their night quarters, lock them up and hand over to the small night staff of about seventy a battened-down station, secure and easy to guard.

If Hakstrott's plan worked, the seventy night-duty Adamites would emerge into a fort completely under Terran control.

"Yes," said Stewart.

"What do you mean, yes?"

"I mean I agree."

"I'm glad. I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't"

THERE was no need for them to whisper, but they did, knowing Gilen and Don Slent were in the next room.

"Even with you and Mrs. Grumeyer as close as this, you think they sense nothing?" Miller murmured.

"We don't," said The Great Nicolas, "so probably they don't"

Grumeyer carefully set his little crystal device. In drab, inconspicuous clothes, Nick and his glamorous wife would never have rated a second glance.

Miss Heilbron was not present. Her job was elsewhere. Two policemen stood by the door, silent, waiting for orders.

A light tap on the door told them that Don Slent had left the building.

Grumeyer and Doris sat down. They did not link hands or even look at each other.

"Now, please," said Grumeyer to Miller, including the two policemen with a gesture, "don't talk, whatever happens. I'll talk. Doris may talk. We won't disturb our own concentration, but you could."

After a pause he said casually, conversationally, "She knows

she's being probed, but she is not particularly worried."

Miller had to clench his fists in the effort not to ask questions. The girl was not particularly worried? An Adamite secretly among Terrans, physically helpless against them, suddenly aware that she was being probed mentally—and she was not particularly worried?

"This girl," said Grumeyer, "is nervous and timid when there is little danger. She finds courage when it is needed. Her potential is even greater than I thought. She knows there are telepaths among us, but is surprised that we have units too. She is one of four— of eight—I'll try to get that clearer."

"Quadruplets," said Doris. "Her sisters and her father's brothers."

"Yes, I see. The Adamites have only four such units. In sum they have far less telepathic experience than Terrans, but ours is spread thin among scores of individuals and theirs is concentrated in four practical partnerships of two."

While they calmly and methodically took the girl's mind to pieces, Miller was bursting to ask a score of questions. In particular, what was Gilen doing about all this?

By chance, he got one of the answers at once.

"She's as interested in this as we are," said Grumeyer. "Although she's trying not to give anything away she —Doris?"

"She doesn't resent us," said Doris. "But other resentments . . . She is not wholly in favor of the enterprise she's engaged in. None of her sisters are. Yet something deep, something emotional makes her—"

"She does hate Terrans," Grumeyer exclaimed. "Very deep down—"

"No, it's not hate. You might as well say love."

"Love-hate. I get a curious idea she *is* a Terran."

Doris cried out as if in pain. Grumeyer started and stared at her.

"I'm all right," said Doris, though she was very pale. "She didn't like that. She knew you thought she was a Terran, and she hit back at you for thinking it."

"If she hit back, she missed me."

"She didn't miss me—"

"Now why should she lash out at the very thought that she might be a Terran?"

Miller could have answered that. All Adamites had to believe they were the First People. Telling Gilen she was a Terran was denying her most fundamental belief.

In his own way Grumeyer was working around to this conclusion. "She's an Adamite, yes. She was born on Eden and until a few months ago . . . Something happened a few months ago. Doris, can you get that? A few months ago somebody made her believe something that isn't true—or denied something that *is* true. She's

fighting to keep a secret deep in her mind, something we Terrans are not to be allowed to find out—"

"Nick!" said Doris, suddenly, warningly, and stretched out her hand to him.

But it was she who suddenly went white and rigid. Grumeyer cried out, jumped up and bent over Doris.

And Miller signaled to the policemen to take the Adamite girl.

THEY were all in Gilen's room. Doris was there too. If she was harmed it was not physically.

Gilen was quite docile. She looked curiously at Grumeyer, at Doris. Miller and the policemen did not interest her.

Strangely, she apologized to Doris, who was pale and shaken. "I had to stop you. You were tearing me apart."

"Doris?" said Grumeyer anxiously.

Doris smiled. "Fortunately, by pure chance, I don't mind. I don't mind that when the skin grows again, I won't be a telepath. I never wanted to be a telepath. But as you hit out—I got what you were trying to hide. Your superiors sent you on this mission with certain things blocked in your mind. Certain things some Adamites know."

Doris shook her head and leaned back. Nick fussed over her for a moment, but turned from her after a few whispered words.

He spoke not to Gilen, as Doris had done, but to Miller.

"There's something implanted in that girl. *We are the real people.* She has to believe it. It's quite false, a purely emotional belief—"

The policemen had to restrain Gilen as she tried to get at Grumeyer and stop him saying what he was saying.

"This whole operation," said Nick, "was tentative partly because Adamites would always expect to be defeated by Terrans. That explains their instant withdrawal fifty years ago when—"

"I could not tell you what you most want to know," Gilen interrupted, "because I don't know it either."

Nick looked a little puzzled. "She's trying to hide something she doesn't even know. This is strange. Doris?"

"I think it's something that one of her sisters knows."

"Yes. But we didn't get their names or locations."

Miller smiled thinly, looking at Gilen. "That can't be hidden deep. We can easily get it from her."

Gilen sat up proudly.

"You'll never get anything out of me."

"I think," said Miller, "we already have what we want to know from Don Slent."

A few minutes later this was con-

firmed. On his arrest Don was shot full of truth drugs. And Margaret Heilbron knew the right questions to ask.

ERIC was not anxious to have Councilor Hardinge speak to Verne privately. The outcome might be his loss of her services. But the security of the settlement had top priority.

In Eric's tiny office Hardinge said, "I'm Job Hardinge. You're Verne? Well, Verne, twice you've known about gnomes and hemmers and the council wants to know how. Is it anything we can use?"

She shook her head. "Just a hunch. A feeling of danger."

"Sure, I know that. If we haul you out of here could you organize a defense group?"

"I don't want to be hauled out of here. I'm doing important work. I like it and I'm doing it well."

Like most Outwarders, Hardinge was big and tough. Perhaps the gnomes got those who were not, Verne thought.

"There's nothing more important than beating the gnomes. What can you do? For instance, if you led a group of us with guns out on the plain, could you find where gnomes were hiding?"

"I doubt it. I can sort of smell danger—that's nothing new. A lot of other people—"

"Could you find other people like that?"

It was possible she could, but only by revealing more about her telepathic ability than she wanted to.

"No," she said.

"Verne, you're not cooperating. I can understand that you like working here and don't want anybody to interfere with you. Sure, the work you're doing is important and you're good at it, but the point is your work her can wait. We have to do something about the gnomes and the hemmers if we're to go on existing."

"That's exactly the point," said Verne. "Why? Why go on trying to build a settlement here?"

"Oh hell. Quit stalling. We're here. That's it. And the immediate priority is killing gnomes and hemmers. Or stopping them from killing us. Now, honestly, I'm asking you—how can you help against the gnomes and hemmers? You have something. Tell me how we can use it."

"I'll have to talk it over with Red."

"Sure, do that. Red Conrad knows what it's all about. And then come and see me."

She talked it over with Red and he put her straight.

Until recently she had taken it for granted that her present situation was temporary. Now that she was forced to examine her motives, she began to wonder if she could ever really walk out on him.

After talking to Red she went to

the town hall and found Hardinge. "I see now what you were getting at this afternoon," she said.

"Thank Christ for that."

"Mr. Hardinge, I object to swearing. I realize it's only a matter of making certain meaningless noises; but—"

"All right, never mind that. Go on."

"I have certain ideas. If you arranged for Red and me to be free for a while and gave us about a dozen people to work with—including my father—and an open mole—"

"What good would a mole be if it was open?"

"Just an idea I have. You could give us a damaged one."

"And what would you do?"

"Scour the plain around here. Something might come of it."

When he heard about this, Sal was not enthusiastic. "We won't be here much longer," he said. "We have to find out all we can about the Terrans. The local life is irrelevant—"

"Not to them."

"I know, but what good is it to find out about gnomes and hemmers? We'd never try to colonize this world."

"No, we wouldn't, would we?"

"The enterprise is doomed to failure. The people here admit they're never likely to trade advantageously with other worlds. They also admit they're nowhere near being independent. They must eventually abandon this planet."

"Do you see any sign they will?"

"They're stubborn. But they'll finally give in."

"I don't think so."

Indeed, she knew they never would and rather despised Sal for not seeing it. Terrans had a mulish streak; Adamites were far too rational not to give in when they were beaten.

But so often when you were beaten—you were not.

ONE day Hakstrott himself brought Stewart his lunch, and set it down on the bed table in a way that told Stewart at once that this was The Day.

"Eat that," said Hakstrott. "Eat it all, because you won't get anything else today."

Stewart started in on a big portion of roast beef, roast potatoes and peas.

He asked, "It's been done?"

Hakstrott nodded. "Two hours ago. We waited until the day's menu was one that gave us a perfect opportunity."

"How is it going to work?"

"First lunch is on now. Terrans and Adamites together. Water has been used in preparing everything on the menu, Terran or Adamite, except the roast beef and the potatoes. The peas are from cans. Only about three hundred of us know what's been done. That'll be enough."

"And the others won't suspect anything?"

"Why should they? Our three hundred, not all at one sitting, refuse soup, order roast beef and roast potatoes, no dessert, no coffee. They call for a bottle of beer. The others, those who don't know, have soup or dessert or drink the lemonade on the tables or have tea or coffee afterwards."

"And the Adamites who don't eat Terran food?"

"Water is used in all the dishes on the menu today. And in their *acat*, of course. What they drink instead of coffee."

"Nobody will die?"

"No. Nobody will even be drowsy in the afternoon. But an hour after supper everyone except our three hundred will want to lie down. Some will go to bed early. Others will sit down and fall asleep in their chairs."

"Supper—how's that going to be fixed?"

"All food will be cooked in water or have water in it. This time those in the know will say they're not hungry and will just have a piece of chocolate cake and a bottle of soda."

In the big dining rooms the plan, because it was basically simple, was working flawlessly. Every Adamite except Wil and Tomi attended one of the lunch sittings, Hakstrott told Stewart later. "The girl's okay. She's been seen drinking *acat*. We don't know about Slent. He's shut in his room as usual."

"He often has nothing but biscuits and cheese," Stewart mused.

"He drinks *acat* all day."

"Yes, but he has an urn in his room that was probably filled early today —before the water was treated."

"It doesn't matter," said Hakstrott confidently. "He's being watched, of course. He'll be dealt with along with the night guards."

TOMI came to see Stewart in midafternoon. She did not refer to his peevishness at their last meeting. This time he made his manner friendly because that made it natural that he should offer her tea. She nodded. Stewart himself drank bottled lemonade.

"You remember once before I had a feeling of impending disaster?" said Tomi. "I feel it again."

"Disaster?"

She appealed to him seriously. "If there's another move against us there will be more reprisals. I mean that, Stewart."

"You mean you'll back reprisals?"

"I mean they'll be inevitable. It'll be disaster for both Adamites and Terrans. Do you know anything? Have you noticed anything?"

He laughed. "Here?"

"Something's going on, Stewart."

"Can't you manage to make yourself call me John?"

"Somehow, no. Elsewhere one of my sisters has married a Terran. She and another sister want to stay where they are."

"You have radio communication faster than ours?"

"I said I'd be frank, but I didn't say I'd tell you everything. I've half a mind to go to my father and try to talk him into pulling out. What do you say?"

He allowed himself time to think. Hakstrott's effort might fail. It might end in bloody disaster.

"Your prisoners," he said. "The people you took to your ship. They'd have to be returned."

She nodded. "That's understood."

Suddenly he thought of something he had missed so far.

It took a great effort for him to ask casually, "How long would that take?"

"The ship would be here in ten hours."

Stewart thought swiftly. Even if the ship were summoned immediately—in ten hours the station could be entirely in Terran hands, assuming everything went according to plan.

However, all but three hundred of the complement of Fort Plato would be unconscious for many hours more. The fort could not be made a fort again, fully efficient and fully manned in ten hours.

There would be a battle if the Adamite ship arrived.

That made up his mind. The Adamite ship must not be summoned. Or the longer the summons was delayed the better. Fort Plato had to be allowed maximum time to become a Terran fort again. He did not think it would fall again with Tomi and Slent out of action.

"No," he said. "I don't think you should run."

She looked at him with all the old suspicion. It had never been more justified. He had to divert her somehow.

"You say two of your sisters want to stay where they are. I know why you don't want to stay."

"I'm listening."

"You've met, properly met, only one Terran—me. And we've never hit it off. I don't suppose we ever will."

"No." Her agreement was emphatic. Excellent, Stewart thought, though with a pang of regret. He had lost her, but he had caught her attention.

"But it would be just as easy for you as for your sisters to find a Terran who would at least interest you."

"How?"

"Let me pick one for you. Go right now and find my brother."

"Your brother? The checker?"

"The former checker."

"Why him?"

He lay back on the pillows.

"Brothers often don't get along too well. Sometimes their very similarities are to blame. Alan is like me in many ways. I have a feeling—I always had—that the differences are exactly the ones you'd like to find in me.

"You never said anything about this before."

"Naturally. I really care for you, Tomi. Or I could. Or I could have."

She was bewildered and suspicious. "I've been lonely here. I admit it. But if you think I'm so lonely and sex-starved that I'll—"

"I'm not thinking of anything in particular except that Alan is just the kind of young Terran you should have been spending your time with—and weren't. Want to find out about it?"

She stood up. "Why not?"

As she went Stewart breathed a sigh of relief. He had diverted her from her feeling of unease and her plan to summon the ship.

And although events had forced him to arrange this particular meeting, it might work out. He and Alan had always gone for the same kind of girl.

He sighed and tested his foot. It would do. He'd be able to hobble about when necessary.

THE tiny ship paused only briefly near Station 692. Nick's crystal was on. Gilen's thought stabbed at Pariss, who was asleep. Far Slent was deliberately excluded.

GILEN: Pariss, I have to know. That thing you have hidden in your mind—

PARISS: (Shock, incredulity. Gilen near, a strange mental crackling, Gilen with power of thought that made her a different person; Gilen, timid Gilen, roaring like a lion—without Don, with somebody else. I can't—

GILEN: Pariss, I have to know. Pariss, we've got it. The seed. It's on this ship.

PARISS: You managed to steal it and get away with it?

GILEN: No, the Terrans are in control here and they haven't promised to give it to us. But they've said they might.

PARISS: They just might?

GILEN: We have to bargain, Pariss. We're beaten.

PARISS: Have you surrendered to the Terrans?

GILEN: No, but I'm bargaining. They have the seed and you know something important. If you tell me what was hidden I may have more to bargain with.

She got it. And The Great Nicolas got it too.

YAWNS became frequent after supper. Stewart, anxiously

waiting for news and still in bed, was reassured to hear that Adamite suspicion had not been aroused. As well as having a soporific effect, the drug worked as a tranquilizer. People merely yawned and said, "Roll on bedtime." Children willingly went to bed early. A few adults who were not creatures of habit did likewise.

Tomi, in deep conversation with Alan Stewart, who had always thought her the most wonderful woman he had ever seen, did not notice drowsiness creeping up on her. Warning bells had entirely ceased ringing in her head, seduced into silence.

At eight o'clock an Adamite colonel at last became suspicious and ordered a check on the air supply. When this proved negative he shrugged, stretched himself and lay down for a moment. Two minutes later he was snoring.

The three hundred Terrans moved into action. The Adamites were gently disarmed.

Stewart hobbled from the clinic, Hakstrott beside him.

Hakstrott was triumphant. "Look at them," he said. "Sleeping beauties. Only it'll take more than a kiss to rouse them."

Forty minutes of clearing up followed, some of it bloody. Seventy sleeping Adamites had to be overcome one by one, group by group. Since there were three hundred armed Terrans to do this, the outcome was never in doubt. But there were some thirty more deaths, Adamite and Terran, to add to the two massacres.

Tomi and Alan Stewart were found together on the green unharmed, asleep. It was fitting, John Stewart thought, that Tomi, who had won Fort Plato on the green, should meet defeat there with Alan, now the victor.

It was not quite nine o'clock when Stewart quietly opened Wil Slent's door and hobbled in. To make the situation clear he had a gun in his hand.

"Good evening," he said pleasantly. "I'm informing you officially, Director Wil Slent, that Fort Plato is back in our hands."

Wil took only seconds to make up his mind that this was no hoax. Hakstrott, coming into the room behind Stewart, was also armed. Wil leaped to his feet, stepped back against the wall, taking from his pocket a small clear object like a large teardrop.

"Don't shoot," Wil told Hakstrott quietly. "Your killing me would be fatal for both of you."

"You've summoned your ship?"

"Yes. And I think you know, Stewart, that I cannot surrender? If I release this button—which I am now holding down with my thumb—the entire fort will be destroyed. It's a precaution I took from the beginning."

Stewart, whose foot was sore, sat down comfortably. "What good would that do?"

"It would be a greater disaster for you than for us. Four hundred of us will die. Five thousand of you."

"That's one way to look at it, I suppose."

"Stewart, I know you. I want you to stay. Tell *him* to get out and shut the door behind him."

Stewart looked over his shoulder. Hakstrott was unsteady on his feet and his left eye was twitching.

"Better do as he says," Stewart said quietly.

Hakstrott closed the door behind him.

"Have you killed my men?" Slent asked.

"Only those we couldn't help killing. Twenty or so. The rest are unharmed but helpless."

"Tomi?"

"Like the others. Sound asleep."

"How did you do it?"

"It doesn't matter. The important thing is that we've done it. Switch that thing off, Slent."

"No. It gives me something to bargain with."

"Not very much."

"You know something of our ways. If I am defeated utterly—I have nothing to live for. I might as well be dead."

"So you would blow up Fort Plato and everyone in it, Terran and Adamite, just to take us all with you?"

Wil smiled. "It wouldn't be selfish, Stewart. In a way it would be selfless. It would be less than utter defeat."

"And Tomi?"

"I have a most unusual advantage —you see, there are four of me and there are four of Tomi. Although I have no wish to die and no wish for Tomi to die, releasing this button won't entirely kill either of us. You understand?"

"I think I do. I suppose you hope to gain something by these rather melodramatic tactics. What?"

"I ask you to let us withdraw."

"All of you?"

"Naturally. I promise that the ship, when it arrives, will merely take us off and return your prisoners."

Stewart reflected. There was much in favor of Wil's proposal.

An urgent knock sounded at the door.

"Don't answer it," Wil said sharply.

Stewart levered himself up. "They know the situation. We have the checkpoint — remember? They're watching us all the time."

Contact with the ship will be made if anything happens to me—"

"We all know that," said Stewart soothingly, hoping he was right.

He opened the door. Seeing that Stewart intended to go out, Wil said, "Stay here. If you go I'll—"

"You won't," said Stewart. "Not while negotiations are still proceeding."

He went out, shutting the door

behind him. It might be better, he thought, if Wil did not hear what was said. It turned out he was right. He returned almost at once.

"Most interesting," he said, sitting down again.

What is?"

"Slent, we have to wait for an hour. Perhaps a little more, but not much. I suggest you sit down. And make sure you don't release that button inadvertently."

"What were you told?"

"Let's just wait, shall we?"

Wil gestured with the teardrop, but Stewart only smiled. "You won't do anything so silly as blow up the fort without knowing what's happening. That's one thing I do like about Adamites. One knows where one is with them."

They waited silently.

At last another tap came on the door.

Stewart said, "Careful with that trigger finger, Director. It's easy for you to blow us up but difficult to put us together again."

He opened the door. Four people came in and Wil did not release the button, for two of them were Gilen and Don.

STEWART and Miller found common ground at once. Both were egotists who liked to handle things without interference from above. In other circumstances they could have been antagonists, but now they agreed on the vital necessity of clearing up the situation before TDC put a finger in the pie.

The Adamite ship left with Wil and Don on board but without Gilen or Tomi.

Unlike Verne and Pariss who, when consulted telepathically, would not even consider returning to Eden, Gilen and Tomi thought long and hard before deciding to stay.

It was grotesque, Wil said, that Gilen should be considering a cabaret act with The Great Nicolas. Gilen merely shrugged and said that possibly TDC wouldn't allow it anyway. But Grumeyer's offer gave her a place among the Terrans, a springboard, an opportunity she had not been previously granted. Verne and Pariss had already found their futures. She was looking around for hers.

Twenty-four hours earlier Tomi would certainly not have remained. But she, like Gilen, felt that her adventure was just starting. She had not fallen in love with Alan Stewart—nevertheless, she was prepared to go on seeing him, prepared to meet Terrans other than those in Fort Plato, where she would always be hated because her father had ordered the execution of two hundred Terrans.

She asked Miller, as a comparatively impartial Terran, how she was likely to be treated on Earth. He said sourly, "You're young and

appropriately shaped. You'll be a heroine. You'll make a billion dollars and marry eight times."

What finally decided her was a strange new contact in which her father and uncles played no part.

PARISS — Hugh — *Station 692:* It's the only way. We've all got to stay, of course—Tomi and Gilen have to take our word for it, Verne, but it's impossible to go back. Is Hugh doing all right? The poor guy hasn't the faintest idea of what's happening, but he's doing his best.

GILEN — Nick — *Fort Plato:* Not very well, frankly, but it's amazing that it works at all. They're just a collection of people with trace telepathic potential?

VERNE: That's all. But as a group working on a specific problem here, we're terrific. It's a question not just of tracing gnomes and hemmers, but trying to reach them. The Terrans themselves could have gone on for years and gotten nowhere, but with a little help from me—and Sal before he left—we've very nearly got an insoluble problem solved—but that's my problem, not yours. Why did the Terrans give you what you wanted? In four words: it's nothing to them.

PARISS: Verne, you do understand them! Red must be the same to you as Hugh is to me.

VERNE: Hardly, Pariss, hardly. Yours is the great love of the galaxy—ours is a working arrangement. Curious that Red and I should actually be married, while you and Hugh—

PARISS: Oh, we'll be married. But we want everything cleared up first.

VERNE: Anyway, about their letting us have the seed —well, first of all, they have plenty. Right, Gilen? Second, they don't mind our having it. Not in the least.

PARISS: They'll make coarse jokes about it.

VERNE: They'll say Adamite men must be the laziest in the galaxy if they don't take the trouble to father their own sons.

TOMI: All right, so you know all about it. Tell me honestly why Gilen and I should stay.

PARISS: You'll regret it all your lives if you don't. Because the Terrans *are* the real people. That's part of what I knew and you didn't. Who could have guessed the other part?

SO TOMI stayed.

Sal Slent was picked up by the small Adamite ship lying off Outward. It had not yet been revealed to the Terrans there that Verne was other than what she seemed. Another small ship took Far Slent and the rest of the Adamites, except Pariss, from Station 692. When it had done so—and not before—Hugh showed Pariss the device which would have enabled him to retake the station and she understood at once why he had not wished to use it. It was a vibrator tuned to one specific encephalographic pattern, that of Hugh Suyang, an unpleasant device which would have made everyone else, Adamite or Terran, writhe in helpless agony while he personally secured the station. The experience would not have been fun for anyone and, since Pariss's mental sensitivity was immense, it might well have killed her.

Orders from Fort Plato were that the ships should be allowed to leave the solar system unmolested. Miller and Stewart were correct in assuming that these orders, in the name of the officer commanding Fort Plato, could not be countermanded in time to make a difference.

"It's quite amusing," said Miller, "that you and I should be induced to act generously and quixotically, Stewart. Of course we are right. Proper Adamite-Terran relations won't start for at least a generation—obviously. When they do they have a chance of starting right. All the same, it's a laugh that we fixed it."

IX

IT was a surprise to Miller to find Margaret Heilbron on the panel. He found himself inclined to resent the situation. He was in a sense on trial. Putting him on one side of the table and Miss Heilbron on the other seemed rather like endorsing her part in the matter at the expense of his.

John Stewart was the first speaker. Facing the seven men and four women on the panel, he began smoothly: "It has been suggested that the departure of the Adamites, except for the four girls, was rushed through by those on the spot with indecent haste. Protracted negotiations have been proposed. Let me say at once it was my conclusion—and it still is—that the sooner flash point was averted the better."

Some of the six senior officers, three civilians and two observers listening to him nodded approvingly. Stewart was employing the courtroom tactics of which he was an acknowledged master. He did not painstakingly establish that there had been considerable danger of an open battle; he had summarized that as a foregone conclusion.

Unless somebody immediately challenged the phrase "flash point," the implications of his statement would be tacitly accepted.

Stewart went on. "Dr. Miller, who even before this affair was recognized as the leading authority on Adamites, will explain their motivation in a moment. By the way, I don't believe you have been told that three of the four girls, Tomi, Pariss and Gilen, are here and ready to give evidence if necessary."

He knew perfectly well they had not been told. Stewart never willingly went into any inquiry without more than his arm up his sleeve.

"We'll be very interested to hear from them," said the president of the court. "Three, you say?"

"The fourth, Verne, is still on Outward. The people there have not been told of her background. Possibly it would make no difference to them. Verne is something of a national heroine there.

"But for one thing, and you all know exactly what I mean, it would be possible to consider this whole affair in the light of a somewhat irregular state visit. Let's just for a moment look at it the other way around. If we had a chance to spy on the Adamites, would we have turned it down?"

Nobody said anything until a retired air force man, taking a new angle, asked why, particularly, the Slents came to possess their peculiar talent.

"The theory has been advanced that the reason may lie in the fact that the men are half and the girls are one-quarter Terran."

This produced a considerable effect, which Stewart ignored, taking the opportunity to yield blandly to Miller.

"BEAR with me for the moment," said Miller, "while I go back ten thousand years."

A choleric ex-major rumbled to the effect that he didn't want a lecture.

Miller restrained himself, merely snapping, "If the matters I'm about to deal with were not extremely relevant I wouldn't waste your time and, more important, mine, by detailing them. To resume, if I may—the Adamites know as little as we do about our history before Egyptian civilization. But what we know is this—at one time in the life of the human race an advanced earlier technology depended far more on chemistry than does the present machine age. Effects now accomplished by mechanical means were achieved via chemistry. The ancients' secret of reaching the stars is lost, but it's a fair guess they employed chemical rather than mechanical means.

"The religion of this early race, ancestors of both Adamites and Terrans, was fanatically against

change in the physical makeup of humans. 'Made in God's image' has remained in our religion to this day. The Adamites evolved a way of preventing evolution, to put it unscientifically. The basis was chemical—I can tell you no more than that. The effect was that the genes were stabilized. The colonists would not evolve physically. That's why after such a long gap, Adamites living on a world similar to but not identical with Earth have not adapted physically."

No one objected to his lecture.

"Only fairly recently did they find that inability to change was a liability."

Miss Heilbron interrupted. "Is it true that many Adamites are sterile?"

Miller didn't like interruptions. "Yes," he said shortly.

"And that's part of the reason they wanted a bank of Terran semen?"

"Please, Miss Heilbron, let me tell this in my own way."

"I just thought you were getting bogged down," she said helpfully.

He ignored her and continued rapidly: "Sterility became a major problem only when they started colonizing worlds other than Eden. The environment of these other worlds demanded certain physical variations. The Adamites couldn't change. Fifty years ago the Adamites met Terrans. Terrans could adapt—they couldn't. Terrans could throw up new types— they

couldn't. Terrans could breed freely on new and different worlds— they couldn't. It was this knowledge of inferiority more than anything else that made the Adamites withdraw.

"Some forty years ago a Terran ship in trouble made for Eden because it was the only populated world in reach. She crashed on Eden. Of the seven survivors only one recovered fully. Four died within a month and the other two were helpless cripples for the year or two they lasted.

"The man who remained, James Robertson, was the second radio operator. Apparently he had an unhappy background on Earth, and welcomed life among the Adamites. He found no enmity. Since the Adamites then as now wanted to learn all they could about Earth, he became an important man. The question of returning him to Earth did not arise. He didn't want to go. He even took an Adamite name. He married an Adamite and had four children—all at once— and named them Wil, Far, Don and Sal."

Nobody said a word.

"What interested the Adamites would have been a small thing to us, but it was important to them. The babies did not have frozen genes. They could evolve. Their children could be adaptable.

"The special sympathy between the Slent brothers did not arouse much interest—twins and triplets among the Adamites possess this mutuality. But the advent of telepathy on Eden, in the persons of the four girls, was another matter.

"This proved that what Eden needed was Terran blood. Whether it had been intended or not, this was the key that unlocked the Adamites' genetic prison. It made up all the ground lost in hundreds of generations. Adamites are small. One change in us in the last few hundred years is an increase in the average height and weight. The Adamites—"

Miss Heilbron interrupted again. "Dr. Miller, the Adamites who led this visitation—"

"I know. The Slents are not small, for obvious reasons. And all the other personnel chosen for this operation were tall Adamites."

"Robertson had no more children by his wife and his sons were childless except Wil. But the Adamites know as much as we do about artifical insemination and there are literally hundreds of men and women fathered by Robertson, of whom some have latent telepathic talent. Robertson is dead now. He died seven years ago, before the full extent of his gift to Eden was known.

"And although the Slents have only Wil's four girls by natural means, they, too, have hundreds of offspring by AI. Some of these offspring also have telepathic talent."

It was scarcely necessary for

Miller to do any more explaining.

The Adamite venture had had as its main object the capture of Terran seed. The four girls, obviously highly talented, had been expected to become pregnant, but what mattered even more was the capture of the seed of uncounted Terrans. This could unlock the whole Adamite race.

The Adamites, desperately needing the seed, had never imagined asking for it. They had assumed they must steal it, meanwhile plotting to bypass a space war.

THE atmosphere at an equivalent meeting far, far away was initially less friendly.

General Print was still alive. Early in the proceedings, however, he said he was sorry he had not died before he had to witness the return of four defeated Adamite Directors without the most valuable section of their force—their own daughters and nieces.

Wil said with the quiet dignity he had acquired, "My daughters were placed in command, General. You acquiesced in their being placed in command. I make no excuses—but you cannot blame any of us here that they chose to remain."

"No," the general admitted. "But you suffered defeat. You admit as much. The Terrans triumphed in all four echelons."

"There," said Sal Slent, "you are not merely unfair but quite wrong, General. We have no reason to suppose that we should ever have been detected on Outward as Adamites. Verne's record there has been one of continuous success in what she set out to do."

"At the Terran General Purposes Station," said Far Slent, "Suyang could have retaken his command from the beginning. Nor could we have known this, since he is a telepath and probing him before the occupation began would have alerted him and made the operation impossible."

General Print, frowning, said, "I do not like this new attitude. You seek to evade responsibility. First you blame the four girls, saying they were in command, not you. Then you excuse yourselves. In my day an Adamite officer stood or fell by his achievement."

"This, we learned among the Terrans, is wrong," said Wil. "Certain of their national armies at one time had similar beliefs. The consequence of such an attitude is that a general cannot gamble. But if he meets an enemy who *will* gamble, who can afford to gamble, in the end he must be beaten."

The general had to fight for self-control. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"That if we failed, we failed as Adamite Directors, steeped in the tradition of the Adamite Navy. And if the ruling is that we should be executed, I tell you now what I shall say when given my final opportunity to speak—that if you

fight TDC this way you will be defeated."

"That is your considered opinion?"

"It is the opinion of all of us."

The other three nodded.

"It will be given due weight."

The meeting went on for a long time. Old General Print became very tired. But he and the other officers had to admit finally that the new resilience, the new toughness of the four officers before them bore out all they claimed. They were not the same men who had started on the operation.

PARISS had the last word the first time she had a bitter quarrel with Hugh—who had, in a mad moment, chased a secretary because Pariss was pregnant again and capricious. They had never spoken bitterly to each other and were shocked by what each said. The reconciliation was a passionate relief to both of them.

But as she found Hugh, her Hugh, her nearly perfect Hugh, apologetically making up to her, freely and sincerely acknowledging that she was the one who counted, not merely in their marriage but as a person. Pariss suddenly said, "We are the real people!"

"I beg your pardon?" said Hugh politely.

"We are the real people!"

"Yes, that's what I thought you said. What does it mean? You and I? You and I and little Will? You and I and—"

"You're out of it, darling. I'm sorry, but it's true. You're only a Terran, and a passable, though not remarkable, telepath."

"What do you mean, not remarkable? My new rating—"

"Yes, darling. I love you—or I wouldn't have cared if that little bitch had taken you and eaten you. In many ways you're most remarkable. You're wonderful. But *we* are the people who count, all the same. The Adamite-Terrans. The offspring of two great races. The four of us. Verne and Red practically run Outward. You're a colonel now and you know very well you'd never have made it at your age if you hadn't married me. Tomi and Alan are high in TDC, and Gilen is so rich she'll be able to do anything she wants whenever she finds out what it is—"

Hugh kissed her. "Now before I beat you," he said "get this straight. You're half right. But only half. You and your sisters are fabulous—but tell me, where would Verne be without Red? Gilen without Nick or some other link man? Tomi without Alan? You without—"

"Exactly, darling!"

"But you said—"

"Language is a poor way to communicate if you don't need it." She sighed. "Real people are those who need each other. You know what I mean." •

His kind had always killed by night and died by day . . . but a new dawn was at hand!

HABITS OF THE RIGELIAN NIGHT FOX

ED BIANCHI

HE CAME awake suddenly. His muscles were tensed, he was growling, but his eyes and brain were overwhelmed. *Danger . . . stimulus . . .* The light flared around him. His head pounded with sensation.

The light—the light! It couldn't be shaken. He was on his feet, wincing. The light was blinding, teasing . . . a madcap confusion.

With practiced deliberation he turned, sought the deepest recess of his burrow.

As a last alternative he tried to hide his eyes in the fur of his tail, shutting them tightly. His eyelids quivered with the exertion, but the light was a red glow that seared into his brain.

Dazzled and frustrated he leaped to the wall, lashed out with his claws and dug a hole for his head and muzzle. And a breathing passage. Ramming his head inside he managed to tame the torture of the light enough to feel he could return to sleep.

He was yet a young, unmated male and therefore of low status. His burrow, accordingly, joined the main tunnel close to the entrance.

He had no fear of the dayhunters. They rarely would dare to venture into the tunnel. Besides, he had killed many during his night hunts. Even with light blasting into his burrow he was sure he could fight well enough to save himself. No, the trouble with his burrow was that if he awakened during the day the light would be enough to madden him.

His fur, ruffled by his tensed skin, settled slowly. His breathing slowed. His eyelids relaxed. The light that remained in his eyes was enough like starlight to keep it from bothering him. Sleep closed in. The thoughts dissolved and drifted off.

He awoke. But this time his taut muscles did not twitch against sudden, instinctively sensed danger. The faint light that reached him was that of the stars, almost deepened out of existence.

He paused for several minutes, stretching, feigning, recoordinating his mind and body. He felt for the umpteenth time that state of health, readiness and strength. He trotted out of his burrow and down the tunnel, sensing his way, heading towards the starshine.

Others were already out, wandering about the entrance, sniffing and scanning the bushes for signs of prey.

He headed directly out into the growth, ducking under branches, trotting through the soft humus. His eyes were wide and consciously alert. A dayhunter asleep or concealed in the branches of a bush or a busheater trundling across the ground—either would be fine tonight. He was exactly hungry enough to be satisfied with the amount of food they offered.

A scent shocked him into a run. A dash under a branch, a rapid turn, a sight, pursuit and spring, a biting and a clawing—and the busheater, blood welling from a dozen wounds, was his.

Calming from the dash, he realized that he had just caught his meal.

Starting at the flank of the animal he began to snap and tear at the moist, warm meat.

When he had taken all he required he lay down a short distance from the carcass and confidently began to lick the last remnants of blood from his paws. He had made a lucky and easy kill and

wondered what he might do for the remainder of the night.

After some time to digest his meal he started at a leisurely pace through the brush. The stars overhead, brilliant pinpoints, though painful to look at still attracted his attention and awe. The sky was so full of them it would be nearly impossible to fit any more in. They lighted things softly, evenly, much more benevolently than the brilliant, stabbing rays that came from something unthinkably bright during the day.

A NEW scent caught his attention. A female. Just her scent. An unaccompanied, unmated female. He trotted off in her direction.

His first sight of her told him she was healthy. The starlight sheened on her fur. Her body was taut, trim. Her responses were excellent—she whirled the instant she detected his approach.

He continued his approach, but slowed. He got quite close to her before she jerked back nervously. He stopped.

She turned to walk off. He leaped toward her. She whirled to defend and he shoved her muzzle to one side with his. The taunt angered her. He walked lightly around her, continuing to tease her with feints. Finally in infuriated confusion she sprang at him. He rolled over to accept. She landed, then bounded away in indignation.

He let her go, confident of having performed well.

The rest of the night was spent in a bright stroll and a few aborted darts after prey. All the while the stars flashed overhead.

As the sky grew still brighter he headed for the tunnel. He knew that soon the light would become intolerable and that the day-hunters would be able to kill.

Following his sense and the sound of the others at the tunnel entrance, he made his way back without difficulty and quickly ducked into the comfortable dimness of the tunnel.

He did not stop to socialize near the entrance but continued toward his interior. He thought once he scented the female, but being unsure and feeling a bit hungry from having eaten so early, he decided not to bother to investigate. He ducked into his burrow and, taking care to shield his eyes from the coming light, lay down to sleep.

THE last brilliant purple rays of dayshine were in the tunnel as he awoke. The exotic sparks of color were dazzling, but not really bright enough to be offensive. Fascinated, he moved out into the tunnel.

The glaring color there was more brilliant than he had expected. He stood painfully mes-

merized by the flaring purple. Unable to stand the light he stumbled back, missed the entrance to his burrow, blinded as he was.

He continued down until a few barely perceptible turns in the tunnel shielded him from the light. He paused, and then walked a little farther before stopping to regain his eyesight and wait for the last of the daylight to fade.

He was considering moving back up into the now vanishing light when he was challenged. The growl came from a male of higher status than he, who obviously had no sympathy for those who tried to borrow the privileges of rank. Still, he knew his opponent could not be fully awake or accustomed to the light. Making the most of his advantage he replied with a vigorous and confusing barrage of threats and feints. His opponent became vicious, pouncing, bounding, lashing out, all ineffectively.

Finally, satisfied at his display of defense, he retreated at a fast trot toward the starlight.

He stopped at the entrance to look around and scent the wind and listen—most carefully. A half-acknowledged hope was let go and he set off into the brush, the first of the night's hunters.

Prey was elusive that night and for several hours all he seemed capable of doing was sight an animal, then lose it. He did not make his kill until later on in the night, when he caught a dayhunter who had made the mistake of eating too well and concealing itself too poorly. It's throat torn open, it died slowly, its jaw convulsing and its teeth flashing in the starshine.

He was hungry and only by carefully stripping the body of all its flesh did he manage to satisfy himself.

After relaxing a while he left the carcass and tried scenting the air again. He followed up a few chances but didn't luck out. The female was not around—or at least not where he could find her.

He returned to the tunnel early and spent a good deal of time around the entrance. But finally he decided the effort was useless and turned in for the coming day.

WHEN he roused himself night had already fallen and he knew he had missed his best chance. So he took his time in preparing to leave the tunnel.

Once out he settled down to the real business of hunting and put in a substantially better performance than he had managed the night before.

He spent the night in a pretty purposeful manner, first hunting, then following his meal with plenty of exercise and even some rough play with another male of about his status.

Abruptly his senses alerted him to the female. He dropped all pre-

tense in an instant. He was able to trace the scent to her in a matter of minutes.

She had been having a hard night of it and was still tracking prey when he found her. He stayed behind and to one side of her as she moved along—and she ignored him.

For many minutes he strained every sense in order to spot some prey. He caught the outline of an animal through a dense clump of bushes and scrambled off after it. One hurried glance behind him showed that she had joined the pursuit.

The animal was particularly fast and evasive, but he was in no mood to be shaken now and with a furious effort at speed he overtook his victim and brought it down at a full run.

The female arrived moments later. She hesitated a short distance away, trying to decide whether simply to take the meal, to threaten for it or walk off. She finally moved toward the kill and, after receiving some assurance, began to eat.

She ate slowly and with an air of uncertainty, occasionally looking up at him before continuing. All the time he lay nearby waiting for her to finish.

Finally deciding she had taken all she wanted she looked up at him again. He did nothing.

She came over and lay down next to him to digest her meal.

AS HE lay in his burrow he tried to remember what they had done.

He remembered walking—yes, walking. They had continued walking. Why? Through the starshine and the brush. They had walked all night.

And then at the tunnel entrance—even though the first traces of daylight were showing he had wanted to stay there with her. She had not sensed his wish or had seemed not to. She went right in. But he had wanted to stay out there, even as the light was growing more and more intense.

He could not make up his mind not to let it bother him, so he simply decided to get to sleep—and quickly before the day became too bright.

HE WAS surprised to find her waiting for him at the entrance that night. It was something he had not expected. Her being there felt warm to him, though.

Already they were growing close. She seemed to feel safe near him. He felt her added confidence in him and it worried him a bit.

They moved quietly and slowly through the night. They did so for love of quiet, not stealth. He thought once that they should really be hunting. They would need something to eat. But she seemed to in love with the quiet and the warmth between them for hunting. There was no hunger.

He nuzzled her.

There was no hunger. He felt none until he and she were back at the tunnel entrance, with the threat of day in the skies. Then he felt it as an anguish. She headed on into the tunnel, but he had to stop. A whine escaped him. She turned to look at him—something in her answered and sympathized. She almost started back to him. But faced with the growing light she turned away again and walked slowly down.

Left on his own, he felt drained. His anguish became a lonely remorse. He stumbled into the tunnel and entered his burrow. There was some small comfort in the darkness he lay down in. And sleep was always kindly.

DARKNESS? Night again. Not long had it been night, but the light was starlight and hunters were about.

He felt he had slept well and that he was very, very hungry.

He met her as she was coming from the deeper portions of the tunnel and they continued together out into the open.

They hunted in a bright but purposeful fashion that night, bringing down two kills and sharing each of them. They played gently, affectionately most of the rest of the night. She became drowsy and he let her rest while he preened her fur.

This time as they went back toward the tunnel she acted rather droopy and paused in the entrance with him. She lay down.

For an instant he was horrified. But his fears didn't mean much now. He lay down with her.

The game started with small, tentative pawings. Licks followed. Then came nibbles. A nip. More vigorous movements. Intense, excited. The light was growing brighter. Objects glared into their consciousnesses. The light sparkled on their furs, gleamed in enraptured eyes, heightening their excitement and intensifying their growing frenzy. The brilliant colors of the beginning day surrounded them and added to the violence besieging their bodies and brains.

They struggled for sensation, receiving it in contacts, pawings, nips, nuzzles, pressures, contractions, flexings. Her assault was no less vigorous than his—sometimes she bit him hard enough to make him yelp.

The light was too brilliant, too blinding, too maddening to see by—sanity was out of the question. They struggled and thrashed in all all-enveloping sea of unbearable feeling.

An incredible pain in his thigh, another in his shoulder—in his back with the full light blazing right through his brain! Claws—teeth! He lashed with his legs and tried to bite back at his attackers. Pain—light! He scram-

bled to his feet and felt claws and teeth trying to bring him down again. Dragging his attackers with him he headed toward what must be the deeper end of the tunnel.

His body seemed solely devoted to registering pain. It throbbed with it. Never had he felt so gritty and disabled, so harassed by pain . . .

His attackers were gone. He could only dimly realize it and then the thought was drowned in a flood of agony in his body, in his brain, in his eyes—his ears. In his ears was what he didn't want to hear; what he wished the pain—this fantastic pain—would drown out. But he heard it again and again—the piteous death screams, the souless noises of the carnivores . . .

AWAKENING was a fitful thing—he avoided it as much as possible. The pain was dulled only by monotony. The throbbing had not ceased.

No, he could not come fully awake. He only reached the borderline of awareness. And it was intolerable. The only horror that was gone was the light. The screams the smell of open blood and the helplessness, the sense of infirmity that bordered on death—these stayed with him.

WHEN he finally could spend some time awake and not insane with pain, it seemed he had spent his entire life in agony.

He became aware that he was being fed and that this burrow was larger and darker than any he had been in even as a pup.

Others were here, a few healthy—but more like himself, torn open, with dried blood on their wounds and fur. And one who thrashed in agony almost continuously for days, sleeping only in exhaustion, until he died.

Mated pairs were here, some with very minor wounds. Most acted as if they had been through all this before.

It may have been days before a realization of the significance of all he was experiencing first struck him—the times when he could think were few. He was still in great pain and when not crying and whining in agony he had other things to cry and whine for. His mind was not to be used because there were too many things it could remember . . .

But still at some time he thought about the mates and their wounds—and his wounds and her—and of screams.

He knew all about it now. He had learned all about why mates had so many scars. He knew where the injured came from and where they went and why the elders preferred to hunt dayhunters.

It had nearly cost him his life to find out. Had it cost him even more dearly. Many had found out this

way. Many probably never found out. How many wouldn't?

It was a horrible, terrible trick, this threat that hung over his kind.

His existence was now to be valued.

It was a long time before he even thought of getting up. And when he tried, the cracking of dried blood, the flexing of injured muscles and the splitting of unhealed wounds sent him down screaming in wretched agony.

He resigned himself to spending the rest of his life where he lay in constant pain and on the brink of agony.

Finally one of the healthy males started to shove him, to force him to his feet. His pain was now bearable. He even mustered a show of defense. But he shuffled away from his opponent soon enough.

He fell once and felt he should not get up again. But the prospect of returning ability was too great. He managed to get to his feet again.

He worked his way into the main tunnel and stood there. He couldn't hunt. He couldn't live.

He turned and reentered the burrow. Cautiously he lay down again. He was not disturbed. But he would get up tomorrow and the next day. And perhaps he would again see the light of the stars.

HE CONTINUED to get up and slowly regained his abilities. First he merely walked around, but soon he was helping the healthy ones in their caring for the injured.

He spent a great deal of time in that capacity. On one occasion he helped to drag one who had ceased to suffer back out into the starshine. The task tempered his joy at seeing the stars. They would only shed their benevolent light so long before they were overwhelmed by the violence of the day. And drawn to that violence, mates would die.

During his last nights at the communal burrow he sometimes ventured out into the starshine in efforts to regain some of his long lost skill at hunting. On one such night he accidentally roused and killed a dayhunter and decided to return to his own burrow.

His former burrow was occupied and he knew better than to challenge the healthy young thief. He moved on down the tunnel.

Somewhere along the line he noticed a burrow that was unoccupied. He could guess why.

He moved in and was not challenged. Apparently his wounds had gained him enough status to allow him to fit comfortably into a more prestigious neighborhood.

But it took many nights of hunting before he felt he had regained his old capabilities.

HE HAD hunted dayhunters exclusively recently—but this

night was still going to be different. His careful scrutiny of the bushes was prodded by more than hunger. When he found one finally, leaped, grabbed it in his teeth and dragged it to the ground, he went about the task of killing it in a manner more deliberate than normal. The glare in his eyes was not to be found on the hunter of food.

Even so, it was not without several hesitations that he left his victim for a search of his next kill of the evening.

He had killed many more before he finally ate, rested and headed back to the tunnel. He trotted through the night with new satisfaction. He had killed only a small fraction of the dayhunters in the area, but a few nights like this one would serve more than to help satisfy his thirst for vengeance.

The stars were bright all over the sky and pain had not bothered him all night. He was feeling better than he had in a long time.

He moved under the bushes with little care for the hunters that undoubtably slept somewhere among them. He felt almost as ecstatic as he had felt as a pup. He was sure now he could solve a problem that had stumped his peers all their lives—and others before them.

He stopped so suddenly that he nearly stumbled. The faint scents on the breeze had shocked, alarmed and ruined him in an instant.

He loped off to investigate, doubting for the first time a sense that had never failed him. But there it was, a pup standing over a dayhunter's carcass, one far too large for it to have killed. There was no doubt in his mind, the pup had found one of his earlier kills and made a meal of it. He needed no other proof to know his other kills had been similarly found and used. He did not even bother to drive the pup away—it would simply return after he left. It would not kill a dayhunter for itself that night.

He lay awake as the day came on. But now it was not the light that kept him from sleep—the light was kinder here, more like starshine, than it had been in his old burrow. No, it was a churning, an eating away in the deeps of his body that caused his wakefulness. He knew no confidence now—only a cruel deflation of his ego. This danger could not be fought—the threat was not in teeth or muscles. It was abstract, confusing, defying and eluding all attack. He felt helpless.

NIGHTS followed and days little noticed between them. There was hunting, killing, dying and eating. Time laboriously wasted, things tediously unnoticed.

Then a night of sudden horror. He fell, tumbling, felt an impact, rolled and slid to a stop.

His alarm was quickly mastered— where was he? In some

deep place. He saw a rim above him, an unnatural horizon that cramped the stars above it. The ground smelled moist and fresh.

He was in a burrow of some sort, something that had been dug out of the ground. It was unlike any of the burrows he had known. This place was deep without being covered—it had no branching tunnels or burrows. He had come into it by falling. Out would be by leaping or climbing.

He had never seen it before, or anything like it. It was newly here. It was near enough to the tunnel for him to have found it long ago had it been here before.

But that it was new didn't surprise him. Many things changed in storms. Bushes were torn apart. The ground became soft and stank. There had been a storm during the last day. He had been awakened by it and had spent a while listening to it and remembering another storm he had heard quite some time before. Storms caused many things. This one had caused some strange things. It had killed and knocked down one of the high bushes. He had been looking at it, walking around it. It was odd to see a high bush on the ground—they looked so much bigger than when they were standing.

Then he had fallen.

His shock was gone now and, sensing this place to be as friendly as any burrow he had ever been in, he set about looking it over. His curiosity led him into a minute study of the space around him. It was not until he knew it as well as any of the area above that he began to amuse himself by digging into the wall of the pit. He dug casually and the hole he produced slowly began to take on the shape of a burrow. Even before he had finished it had a narrow entrance as long as his body and enough room beyond it for him to turn around easily. He had never dug a burrow before, probably because he had never had a space to dig one, but he felt nothing unusual in doing so now.

The burrow was becoming quite roomy when he noticed that it was more brightly lit than it had been. He turned towards the entrance and was struck by the intensity of the light coming in. Already it was too bright to see his way out of the pit. The dayhunters would be out soon. Only the security of his being underground kept him from being unnerved. Despite the uncomfortable light he stayed facing the entrance, prepared to give a determined defense against any dayhunter who would venture in.

For a long while there were no dayhunters. The light grew maddening, but his tolerence of it was fortified by his instinct to survive. Memories of days past served only to tighten his muscles.

There—there was a dayhunter—two—more. The scents were clear—a small pack was above. They

had scented him, the danger was feverishly real.

They drew no nearer—they shifted up the wind and down the wind. They were confused.

His eyelids were down tightly now— he could no longer hope to see. Still the light seared through them in a raging red madness. Defending would be almost impossible. If he opened his eyes the light would blast right through his mind.

He heard a scrabbling and caught a new scent. A dayhunter was in the pit. No sooner had he realized this than he heard piping cries of terror and scrambling on the walls of the pit. For a long while they continued, their frenzy never dimishing. Finally they ceased and the scent was more distant.

He was safe here. The dayhunters were terrified of the pit. He grasped the fact desperately, whirled to bury his face and agonized eyes in the wall of the burrow.

He was safe here—the day would pass and he would survive. The dayhunters were afraid of the pit, of the tunnel, of being below ground. He was safe here.

The day wore on and he managed to sleep through some of it. The night came. He awoke and left the pit. He found and dragged down a dayhunter and ate a needed meal. The he returned to the pit and spent the rest of the night enlarging the burrow, lengthening it and curving the length back on itself.

Long before day threatened he left the pit to return to the tunnel and his own burrow.

IT WAS well into the night before he woke again. It took him quite a while to adjust to the shift in time caused by his oversleeping. He missed the group he normally saw at the entrance—they had long since left on the night's hunt. The sky was ahead of his reckoning. The busheaters were more active than his sense told him they should be. He made an easy kill of one he surprised. It was the first he had eaten in a long while. It didn't satisfy him completely, but he decided not to do any more hunting just yet. He left the carcass and strolled out under the starshine.

The omens were pleasant this night and he noted he was letting his guard relax. Not since he had healed had he felt so glad of the stars. His body no longer reminded him of its infirmities. He sensed again its health and potential. There was a lightness in him that he had not felt in a long while.

He came to an open spot he had known and loved during other nights. Here the stars could be seen as a vast coverage of sky. Here he could see dapplings and vapors and bursts that stood ever still in the pattern of the moving night. Colors and brilliances, faintnesses and

textures, all beautiful to look at, but always a bit painful, always stimulating, as something too wondrous to bear.

Dazzled, he lowered his eyes. It was dangerous to stare too long at the stars—his eyes were full of the ghosts of them. Only in after some minutes did he recover his sight. Such dangers were not to be lightly accepted. Studying the night was not something to be done once the stars were known. His pleasure in the moment was destroyed.

Somber movings were in him as he left the clearing behind. Dangers were ever-present and always most intensely to be guarded against in moments of wonder. It had always been so. Not in his time, nor perhaps even in his parent's time had anyone beheld beauty without subjecting himself to danger. But not until this night had he completely realized the morbid vastness of this truth. It was immune to any effort to alter it.

The mind of the hunter withdrew uncertainly from something that threatened from everywhere. From the stars that shined overhead, the leaves around him and the ground under his feet. He moved on, trailing his depression behind him.

He noted the scent of a female at first without feeling. Hunger knawed at him. He felt disheveled and sightsore. Realities he could not comprehend had crushed his joys from every side.

He stopped. The air moved quietly about him, the brush whispered around him. They had always done so, but he had to stand still to know them. The scent of a female blended with them, became part of the harmonious calm. It soothed him. The dark movings in his mind were lessened.

The female emerged from the brush ahead of him, moving slowly, cautiously. She stopped and looked him over. She bore scars on her hind flank but they were well healed. He thought he saw sorrow in her eyes, a helpless hope of comfort. He wanted her to turn and walk away. There was something terrifying in her calmness—an innocence that was not born of ignorance. She moved evenly, and slowly while he stood still trying to deny a building fear that grew as she came pleadingly close.

She stood uncertain now, worried. In a moment she would be afraid. He moved forward and nuzzled her.

A WONDROUS night! A night brimming with light and confidence, of hope reconceived. He had never hoped for a night such as this, he could never have imagined the joy he suddenly knew as wonderfully real. They played under the stars like pups, almost delirious at their release. The world had taken on a newness. Innocence was everywhere.

She was kind and joyful. If she grew passionate it was in thankful-

ness for the end of a long and craven denial. Such things as she had known she had not been meant to have experienced. But that she had suffered endeared her more to him. They felt a silent sharing of things long known.

At last they rested, warm in the brightness of starnight.

THE day was coming. With it returned the urgency, the fear of the coming light.

He knew again the anguish of needing and saw it reflected in her. The light would be growing soon and they delayed. There was urgency, danger. Instincts howled in opposition and none could be ignored.

The hunter's mind snapped to certainty. He scrambled into a run and, with one look to make sure she followed, doubled his speed to that of a full pursuit.

The light was growing.

They spent that day in his burrow in the pit—and many days thereafter.

She had hesitated when he had leaped into the pit. But she had followed. She had trembled as the day grew, flooding the inside of the pit with a maddening brilliance. She whimpered in fright when the dayhunters came. She had never been so intensely aware of danger, but she stayed with him. She drew on his composure. The danger was outside, all too real, but here she was safe. He made her feel safe. She wanted to feel safe.

And where the burrow doubled back on itself he made her feel warm, and she slept.

He emerged from the burrow into the night with a waking joy. There had been a great change in the world. They hunted that night with a vibrant sense of being alive neither had known before.

HOW the idea spread can never be completely ascertained. The pit was near the tunnel, and in time became well known. The burrow was not overlooked either and more than once he had to chase out a casual trespasser. But how anyone realized the purpose of the pit-burrow is unknown.

But in time another couple joined them in the pit. Neither couple used their burrows as permanent homes— they were still a bit too bright for comfortable sleeping. Nonetheless, they used them often. And if few adults were able to understand the pit-burrows, the pups learned quickly.

Pups there were. They grew strong and healthy and only a few died.

At night they would play in the pit or come hunting. The pups were often amusing in their attempts at the business of hunting, occasionally exasperating, but every so often they surprised him. They would cause him to wonder if *he* had grown up so fast.

And he knew nights when he would look about the pit and see that there was room left to fit another burrow. A few adult mates, a few pups who were no longer pups had joined them there. Some had even made their permanent homes in the pit, though how they could sleep well in the daylight was beyond him.

He and his mate had many pups, many beautiful nights, many warm days. He grew older than many and lived to help build the second pit.

On one pleasant night he went hunting alone, leaving pups, mate and friends for the beauty of a solitary night, the love of the stars.

He spent a long time in wandering, scenting, enjoying the night. Such things had always promised him joy—now they gave more than ever. He felt that things had changed. Perhaps there was more beauty in the world—or less danger.

He noted a scent and traced it with a skill sharpened by long practice. He approached the bush quietly, stopped and searched it carefully. The dayhunter was well concealed and dozing soundly. He moved cautiously to the base of the bush. He waited quietly, judging how best to make his leap. Then moving a bit to one side and tensing, he leaped, grabbed the dayhunter by a hind leg and dragged it down.

The dayhunter landed on top of him, claws and teeth ripping first air, then flesh. He struggled to regain his advantage and lost.

IT WAS then that I broke contact with him.

You can probably barely begin to realize the grief I felt to see him die like any other member of his race. I knew him intimately, though he never knew me or suspected that he was being studied. In the years I spent on Rigel IV I had made many contacts, known many alien minds, but his was the one I learned the greatest respect for.

In the history of every intelligent species there are but a few of his kind, each a transition point in the events that determine success or failure of a life form.

When I arrived on Rigel the nightfox colony was failing. I concerned myself with studying the natural decline of a species. But before I left the pit-dwellers were established and growing at a healthy rate and I had witnessed—and recorded for the first time—a major behavioral change in an animal community in its natural state. Without my help or that of any other life form he had been able to extract hope for his race from a whim of chance.

It was luck beyond reasoning that our minds ever met. I can only feel grateful to have known him so well, to have shared the mind of a primary genius. •

ORNITHANTHROPUS

Can courage ever link dissimilar organisms in symbiosis?

B. ALAN BURHOE

SCHADOW was awakened by his woman.

He sat up from the blankets of marsh cotton, stretching his wings above his head until they touched the low ceiling of woven reeds.

"The skyhunter is dying," she said. "We must leave."

His heart twisted. "Dying? Are you sure?"

"See for yourself." She turned to gather their meager possessions in her thin arms.

He left their cabin and knew the truth of her words even before he had reached the forward opening. He felt the skyhunter's fading life in the uneasy quivering that shook the wood framework of the gondola. He cursed. Anger flared, turning to rage, fading to a sinking feeling of impotence.

A pale yellow tentacle curled through the opening. The amber eye at its tip regarded him.

"Ah, my ponderous friend. What is the matter?" Schadow asked soothingly.

The tentacle wrapped about his waist, reassuring, sad.

On reaching the opening, he looked out and up. The hydrogen-filled balloon-bladder that kept the skyhunter airbore had turned from a healthy crimson to a dusky brown, run with streaks of copper. The airpaddles were clenched as if in pain. The cartilage ribs to which the framework of the gondola was fastened sagged, hardly capable of holding it or the hundred and seven human members of the Seacliff Clan. The sixty green and crimson fish-

ing tentacles hung lifeless toward the glittering sea a half-kilometer below. The single foretentacle that had greeted him snaked away and moved listlessly in the air. He wanted to say something, to reassure the animal, the living dirigible that had been his home and friend and protector all his life, to let his calm voice—

"Schadow."

He turned, recognized the old man who stood behind him. "Grandfather?"

"There is little time. You must move fast."

"And you?"

"You know my duty. We have lived as one, the skybeast and I—we will die as one. You are now Clan Elder. You know what you must do."

Schadow nodded. For a moment they clasped hands, Schadow studying the patriarch's tired, rawhide face. Then he went back to his cabin. Behind him, Grandfather jumped into the air and fluttered up to the head of the skyhunter. It tried to push him away but the ancient one found power in his wings and stayed close, patting the head and talking softly of yesteryear.

SCHADOW gathered the clan at the aft opening and when he was sure that he had had missed no one, ordered his people into the sky. One by one they jumped, arms tightly grasping children or belongings. Their wings flapped until they hit an upcurrent—then they glided into formation, armed men taking the vulnerable positions. Last to leave was Schadow. He threw himself from the gondola, falling toward the distant water, stretched his wings, flew.

Together, silent, they headed toward the land until Schadow judged they had reached a safe distance.

He looked back at the skyhunter.

The bladder was now almost totally copper. The three hydrogen bags were scarcely visible through the once transparent hide. As the wind pivoted the derelict sky beast Schadow saw Grandfather flying close to its head. He saw the creature give one last attempt to push the old man away with its tentacle, saw it fail, saw them grasp one another one last time, enemies once, now brothers.

"It's going to suicide," said one warrior.

Before he had spoken the last word a spark flared in the depths of the bladder. The skyhunter was enveloped in a savage burst of fire that reflected softly off the wispy clouds above and more fiercely off the sea below. Man, beast and gondola became a single inferno that twisted in the air and tumbled into the waves.

The thunder struck at the Seacliff Clan, enveloped and passed it.

For a few moments the flyers

were given increased lift. They took advantage of it and glided in silence toward the granite shore.

A pack of winged amphibians, like tiny pale dragons, soared out from the cliffs to meet them, screaming their challenge and bravado, voicing them all the louder when they were ignored.

"Where do we go now?" asked his woman as Schadow glided in next to her.

"Give me my harness," he said, partly answering her query.

He took the harness of leather straps and silver buckles and dressed himself in midair, fitting the fastenings around his chest and placing the scabbard along his spine. He pulled out the sword of strong white bone and tested its edges, honed over the years to razor sharpness.

"You must go to Starport," he called to his people. "Wait there for five days. If I have not returned by that time you will know that I have failed to tame a sky-hunter and that you must choose a new Clan Elder from among you."

He said nothing more. Nothing else was left to say.

They flew away, a few lifting their spirits from the depths of the tragedy enough to wish him luck. He watched them until they seemed no larger than insects against the brightening blue of the post-dawn horizon. Then he banked, caught the thermal that swept up from the coastal cliffs, dropped into an easy glide to conserve his energy for the ordeal ahead.

THEY had called the colony world Pishkun, from an ancient Sioux word that meant cliff, for indeed it was a land of cliffs as well as rift valleys, crevices and faults —a granite world of eternal upheaval where the thunder of earthquakes was as common as the roar of the ocean. When the colonists had first reached and named Pishkun they had taken its unfriendly nature as a challenge. Thus, after a million years of frustrated dreams that had begun when early man had first looked at the eagle and felt envy, Ornithanthropus had finally been born, for only in the air could life be sustained with any permanency on this world.

Aesthetics had played a greater part in the design of the birdfolk than functional engineering. The wings had been placed at the shoulder blades and were powered by a complex system of muscles that started at the keel-like breastbone, joined the trapezius and ran up the lower part of each wing. The bones were hollow for lightness and the lower eyelids, which were transparent, could cover the eyes to protect them from windblast. To a basicform human, the birdfolk were the symbol of beauty in motion.

Schadow, who was of the fif-

tieth generation of his kind, cared little for the history of his people. He knew it—the basicforms at Starport had told it to him when he had visited that antigrav trading station in his adolescence—but he had found the story only of peripheral interest. Only life, health, the sky, his woman and the skyhunter he must tame meant anything to him.

The day passed into early afternoon without tiring him as he skimmed along the updrafts and climbed for a wider view. Over the sea almost a kilometer away he saw a young skyhunter, shining like a blood jewel over the silver-streaked greeness of the waves. But it was already fishing. It would be too strong for him to outlast. He looked inland.

The nostrils of his knife-blade nose flared. The muscles in his sunken cheeks tightened like braided rawhide. His eyes slitted and the greasy black hair lifted from his scalp. Unsteadily he moved the sword in his hands. What he saw was barely a dot on the horizon but every instinct in him identified it. It was a skyhunter heading for the sea and therefore hungry, therefore weakened.

For a scant moment he debated falling toward the land and foraging for something to eat, then tossed the idea aside. The beast would know by his smell whether or not he had a full belly and it had best sense that he was as hungry as it, unarmed except for the sword, naked except for the harness—equal with it in all respects including courage.

HE STUDIED every facet of the land and air around him. The ground was a tumbled mess of bare rock, strewn boulders, cascades, bogs and patches of brown and green where simple land plants had eked out a living despite the endless assaults upon them by the planet's ever-changing crust. He looked away from the tortured land. With a sense ingrained into him through generations of running upon the winds he looked at the air mass around him and mapped every current in his mind. He saw the draft that swept up from the sea cliffs below him like a sun-warmed glass curtain to touch the inversion layer four kilometers above; saw a large thermal off to his right, marked where it started on the ground near a dust devil, a huge cylinder of moving bubbles of heated air that rose to reach the cumulus clouds that dotted the sky; saw a second curtain-like current rise from cliffs of red granite to his left, but this one bent and rushed dangerously across the jagged top; saw the bulk of dead air that sat ahead of him, shimmering now and then in the form of a seaward breeze.

He couldn't have picked a bet-

ter place to meet the skybeast, he told himself.

It would not retreat inland or go to the left because of the cliffs. It could only attempt to go over him or to his right—or through him.

It came on without evidencing the slightest concern. As it drew closer Schadow was awed at its size—it was bigger than any he had ever seen.

The massive bladder, shining dull crimson in the sunlight, must have been fully forty meters across and almost a hundred long. The three hydrogen sacs inside fluttered larger and smaller as it adjusted its buoyancy in the weak on-sea winds. Sixteen airpaddles, eight along each side swept forward like closed fists, opened to reveal strong black membranes, pushed back to provide thrust. Fishing tentacles were coiled close to the cartilage ribbing that protected two-thirds of its underside from leaping sea carnivores. The poison-celled foretentacle that flipped about the bladder to watch for predators or parasites was set just behind the head which took up the other third. And its eyes—they looked across at him—were twin pools of molten amber, the black pupils expanding and contracting to the beat of the aerial supercoelenterate's savage life systems. They revealed a brooding intelligence that at once terrified and exhilarated him Schadow.

He hovered as best he could in the skyhunter's path.

The creature slowed, watching him. Schadow gave challenge.

"Ho! Skyhunter! I have come to tame you, to form the bond of brotherhood between us for the good of my people—or die trying."

The eyes burned into his.

The foretentacle streaked for him.

SCHADOW swung his sword as he had practiced since he had first taken to wing as a boy, slashing the air in front of him in a series of hissing sweeps. He wanted the beast to know that he could cut the tentacle in two if it threatened him but that he didn't want to.

The tentacle retreated. The eyes studied him, their look now unreadable. For an instant something flashed in those eyes. Then the creature was moving.

At first he thought it was retreating and the concept shocked him, for every skyhunter he had ever known or heard of would rather have suicided than run from an attacker, especially such a little attacker as a man. Then a gulping sound came to his ears. He smiled. It was increasing its buoyancy. It was going to attempt to go over him.

Schadow pushed at the almost still air with his wings and began to climb. The skybeast, airpaddles sweeping lazily to maintain

equilibrium, began to ascend in front of him.

They went up and up until the clouds seemed to disappear as they melded into them and ice crystals danced about them, flickering brilliantly as they caught and broke the sunlight. Schadow's exhaled breath began to form into puffs of frost. The tentacle again darted toward him and again he created a protective shield around him with his sword.

"Ho! You will have to do better than that, great one."

He watched the tentacle retreat and snap in the air as if in anger.

With a mutter the coelenterate began to descend, its hydrogen already cooling and decreasing its lift. Schadow paralleled it.

The clouds reformed above. The atmosphere became warmer.

Schadow flexed his wings to spoil his descent and was amazed to discover that this adversary was picking up downward speed. He allowed himself to fall with it until he was forced to brake.

Surely the thing wasn't going to dash itself into the ground! He felt himself go cold in a way the high frost couldn't have affected him.

It was indeed throwing itself at the twisted rock country. Shaken, the birdman watched it drop until it was falling away from him like a plummeting boulder. It hit the earth, narrowly missing a jagged outcropping. Dust billowed from the impact site. The crimson bladder shook, flattened, appeared to burst. Then it was rebounding back up at him.

Schadow would have laughed in relief and admiration for the creature if it had not been lofting directly at him with tremendous speed. He wheeled, pushing the air in desperation. It rushed past him. The foretentacle narrowly missed him and one of the fishing tentacles touched his left leg. He cried out in pain.

Stubbornly he wheeled again and chased it until it leveled off at four hundred meters.

He checked his leg. A thin welt was forming across his calf. Luckily he hadn't been hooked on one of the barbs or touched by a poison capsule.

"Ho-eee!" he shouted, making the traditional sign of admiration for one's enemy in the air with his sword. In turn, the skyhunter whipped its tentacle about in a remarkable mimicry of the sign.

They settled down to eyeing one another again.

Now perhaps the skybeast realized that it and Schadow must face each other, that each must prove to the other his courage and powers of endurance. And while they strained to endure the ordeal perhaps a bond would form between them.

The huge eyes suddenly shifted and focused behind his right shoulder.

Schadow looked around.

SEVEN armed men stared at him.

Their wings fluttered feebly, their weight being supported by antigrav units strapped to their chests. They gripped swords of the best alloy metal. On their bodies they wore glittering collections of useless ornaments and gadgets.

Fangs! Schadow remembered seeing packs of them when he had visited Starbase and he had heard many tales of their bloody raids. While they were adapted forms, the fangs preferred the sanctuary of the floating plastic city, venturing forth only for murder or pillage.

One flew slightly ahead of the others. Setting a dial on his antigrav, he hovered about ten meters from Schadow, alternately watching the lone warrior and the skyhunter.

"I am Garp," he said.

"So?" Schadow hefted his sword and tentatively tested its edge with his thumb. He looked over his shoulder to check the beast. Though he acted calmly, he strained all the while to maintain his hovering position without appearing to tire.

"I am leader of our pack." Garp had an artificially bronzed skin, a fat belly and shining bald head. He reminded Schadow of a Buddha idol—perhaps ancient religions were the latest fashion among the basicforms, whom the fangs always emulated, body sculpture being the dominant art form among the non-adapted men of the Confederacy.

"Then it is up to you to lead your men—if they deserve that title—away. You should know that the ordeal with a skyhunter is a private matter. You have no right here."

Garp laughed.

"But we have come such a long way to find you. Ven here," he swept his empty hand toward a thinner version of himself who grinned and bowed awkwardly in the air, "saw your people arrive at the base and overheard them talking about you." Now it was Garp's turn to test his sword edge with his thumb, though Schadow saw sky between flesh and metal. "Having nothing better to do, we decided that we should come out and help you. I mean, all that talk that you people keep giving us about living with nature and not against it to to the contrary, we thought that you'd like the power of civilization behind you in this affair." He looked at the beast, briefly meeting its eyes. His voice went softer. "I've never seen a man killed by one of those before." Garp looked at his sword then shouted, "Ven!"

"Ho?"

"The triplets will stay with me. You take the other two and go behind the thing to keep it from getting away."

"Understood." The three adjusted their antigravs and pushed themselves into position.

Garp looked at Schadow. "You."

Schadow felt his jaw muscles tighten in anger.

"In my wide experience in dealing with men of action, I have usually found that even the bravest need a little push in the right direction on occasion. We watched you fighting the thing and it is our considered opinion that you keep too far from it. Right men?"

The trio that moved in behind hin answered in chorus, "Right."

"So let's give him the courage he needs." Garp waited until the three were even with him—before moving slowly toward the warrior, sword held out ahead of him like a lance.

SCHADOW held his position. Garp had slowed so that two others were the first to reach him. Folding his wings, Schadow fell. He outstretched them again and regained altitude, slashing at one fang who had just set his antigrav to dive and had left the top of his head vulnerable. He felt his sword crack through the skull. The man screamed and floated away from the contestants.

He slashed at the second man, missing him by millimeters.

Garp screamed in rage. "Kill him," he ordered.

The other two didn't need encouraging. They rushed at Schadow.

He parried the lunging weapon of the first, ducked the second and looked for Garp. The latter proved to be a greater danger than Schadow had guessed. The fang leader held his sword before him, elbow locked, and maneuvered himself by twisting the dials on his antigrav. He flashed in and out with extreme accuracy and Schadow learned respect for the antigrav as he desperately put up a defense. The other two pressed beside him, forcing him to fall back toward the skyhunter.

"Ven," shouted Garp. "Drive the thing this way."

Schadow looked behind him. Ven and his companions were efficiently moving the skybeast toward him. Not that he feared the skyhunter so much—though he knew what his fate would be if it caught him—but he felt concern that the flashing blades would soon cripple the animal. It was battling with a ferocity it had not shown earlier. Its fishing tentacles lashed out as it rocked in the air. Its foretentacle hung poised to strike. Its paddles sent it spinning on an axis, making it harder to predict its next attack or parry. Even so, it didn't have a chance against this pack. The fact that its fiery suicide—when it accepted defeat—would take its tormentors with it was little consolation.

Something nagged at the back of

Schadow's mind but the fangs gave him no time to find out what it was. His keel muscles were blazing with pain as he was forced to beat his wings to hold his position. He could feel himself weakening. For the first time in his life he envied the power the antigrav gave a flyer, as his attackers pressed themselves more keenly against him. His sword of bloodied bone took the full force of a downward stroke from above and was chipped. He stabbed at Garp, who replied by smashing Schadow's sword with a jarring blow that broke the point. Cursing, Schadow put his full fury into an offense, momentarily driving the three back. Garp lost his temper and for the first time truly led the attack. They came at him at once.

The wind shimmered and the birdman saw a brief updraft roll up to them like a pearl-gray bubble. He flexed his wings. The warm bubble enveloped them, jostling the fangs and lifting their inteded victim above them. Spitting monosyllables, the trio adjusted their antigravs and shot toward him.

Schadow, momentarily relieved from battle and able to rest his burning muscles, was amazed. Had they been so busy that they hadn't seen the thermal? But surely they must have. No matter how involved you were, you always watched the air about you. You had to if you wanted to fly.

Garp and the others were at him again. His weapon rendered useless as a foil, he was forced to slash and chop at them. He scratched Garp's bronze belly, forcing him behind the other two.

HE SAW a second thermal bubble coming up at them. Winging over, he dived. The fangs fell

beside him. When he leveled off, they leveled beside him, prepared to continue the fight. The thermal hit and again he was carried away from them.

They couldn't see! It was a hard fact to understand but there was the proof. Any child of Schadow's clan would have seen that bubble and yet these winged adults had looked right at it without noticing it. Was it possible? He watched them coming up at him, playing with the knobs on their antigravs.

He saw the truth and with it a possibility. These men, adapted for the air though they were, were creatures of the Starbase, where no man ever did what a mechanism could more easily do. Even though they had flown the skies all their lives, they had never really *flown*. Using their wings only as stabilizers, they let their antigravs do their flying for them. Not having the need to know the currents of the atmosphere, they had lost, if they had ever had, the ability to see them. In a very important way they were blind.

Again Schadow dived. This time he looped low and under the trailing tentacles of the skyhunter. The fangs reset their equipment and gave easy chase.

"Ven—" shouted Garp.

Ven looked down and peeled away from the troubled skyhunter, followed by his comrades.

The six formed a rough flock behind Schadow.

Banking to his left, he put his last dregs of energy into flying for the red cliffs.

As his pursuers closed the distance between them he regarded the bleak cliffs and the wispy blanket of air that rose up and over it. Every instinct cried out to him to veer away.

He reached the outer edge of the blanket and soared upward, the wind brushing his face gently and with no hint of where it would take him if he stayed with it. The pack adjusted and rose behind him. Ven was leading and only five meters below, his teeth showing in a tight grin.

Ven overtook him as they reached the summit and Schadow was carried across the rough top. With one hand on his antigrav Ven threw himself at the birdman.

Schadow met sword with sword. As Ven pulled back to make a second stab, Schadow somersaulted beneath him and slashed upward. Blood spurted past his face. Ven screamed and twisted in the air, held aloft by his device.

The second attacker was luckier. His sword caught Schadow's at an angle, breaking it just above the guard. Schadow tossed the handle into the man's face.

Shouting in victory, Garp moved in ahead of the others for the kill.

"Die, you—" he yelled, raising his weapon. His eyes burned.

(Please turn to page 175)

C. C. MacAPP

HOT WORLD

The rule of the Brains was harsh, but so was New Eden. Only special types of men could survive there!

KREG TOMSUN, face set in disdainful lines so the curious citizens wouldn't guess the sick dread inside him, walked as slowly as the two nervous lawkeeps let him. He put down wild thoughts of making a break at this last moment. Insane! Where would he run?

Two blocks ahead Nose Cone, the colony's seat of government—as well as its arsenal and main power plant for the century and a half since Landing—loomed like an immense steel bullet against the blinding straw-colored New Eden sky. How well he knew that silhouette! Just beyond Nose Cone was the obtuse angle of South Fence in which Landington nestled. Beyond the fence rose Desolation Ridge, the weather barrier that split the relatively fertile colony land from Hidry Desert. Though the season was still spring, the kitchgrass was already bleached to a dirty white, and the gullies were baked dry.

Beyond the ridge lay his almost certain exile.

One of the lawkeeps, a careful four paces behind, said, "Step it up, Tomsun!"

The attendant at Access Four flushed and averted his eyes, obviously unwilling to remember Kreg now. Kreg walked past him and stood blinking for a moment in the dimmer light of Rotunda. The sensors detected him quickly. A voice said, "This is Captain Gerlik. Since you were apprenticed to Nose Cone, Tomsun, I'm going to hear you myself. You know my compartment."

"Yes, sir." Kreg ignored the startled glances of citizens; there were few because this was neither a Lecture Day nor a Museum Day. He crossed the high-vaulted chamber to a door a third of the way around the circumference, pushed it open and descended the ramp. One deck down, he left the ramp via another door and walked along a cross-ship corridor. He could feel under his feet the vibration of machinery two decks down and hear the familiar hums. How long, he wondered absently as he had so of-

ten, would the fissionables last? And what would the colony do for power when they were gone?

There were no 'pairbots in the corridor. He pushed open the door of Compartment NC Six, entered and stood facing the stainless-steel cabinet against the outboard bulkhead.

MAN height, the rectangular compartment was. The lower part was featureless—he knew there was machinery in it, and some free space. At face height were six orifices in a horizontal row—the outer two, the ears, about eight inches apart; the inner, the eyes, about three inches apart. The other two were for smelling. Below the line of orifices was the voice-grill. There were, of course, other sensors in various parts of the room, as well as unseen weapons, but the cabinet's particular sensory organs were placed to give the preserved Brain inside as nearly a human viewpoint as possible.

Captain Gerlik, as the history books told, had been only Third Officer, but he was senior of the surviving Brains. One would think, Kreg mused sourly, that some distinction would be displayed. But this compartment and this cabinet were identical with the other four.

The voice from the grill was Gerlik's. "Sit down, Tomsun."

Kreg slid into the single plain chair. He stared defiantly at the cabinet's features.

The voice, when it came again, sounded bored. "Tomsun, as you know, you're entitled to this last hearing. Are there new facts you want to present?"

Kreg sat wordless for a minute. Finally he shrugged. "I didn't hide anything before."

The voice sighed. "All right; I'll state what's on record. One hundred twenty-six planetary days ago you were arrested for fist-fighting. Ninety-seven days ago you were arrested on an identical charge. That being your second citation, you were given Formal Warning."

The sick feeling in Kreg's stomach made him shift in the chair. "The two situations were *not* identical!"

Gerlik said impatiently, "I have access to your testimony, and that of witnesses. In the first instance, a man jostled you and made threatening remarks. You replied and soon you were trading punches. In the second instance, several members of a gang, as you called it, goaded you into fighting by making remarks about your courage or lack of it. Those were the circumstances. The charges were identical."

Kreg shrugged.

The Brain went on, "And now there's a third charge. I suppose you're going to say the circumstances are again different."

KREG sat stonily for a moment. He had refused to talk

at the last trial—witnesses had said enough. Now, though, he faced exile . . . "They were different, if you care. There was—I was with a young lady and another fellow tried to—to cut in. He knew I had received a Formal Warning, so he thought I'd be afraid to fight."

Gerlik sounded amused. "But you weren't, of course, and you swung a fist."

Kreg said, "He swung one first."

"And," Gerlik said, "it was thereupon incumbent upon you to punch back?"

Kreg's face grew warmer. "That's how most of us feel."

"Whom do you mean by 'us'?"

"Young men of my age."

"Which is?"

Kreg said—a little angrily because his age was on file, "Nineteen."

"Rather young aren't you?"

Kreg clamped his lips on a hot reply. He mustn't let himself be needled into saying what was in his mind.

The voice continued. "We'll let that pass, since you seem to consider yourself old enough to break the law. Were either you or the young lady in physical danger?"

Kreg said impatiently, "Of course not. The incident was a—a deliberate challenge to my manhood. I don't see what a thing like this, a simple fist-fight between two young men, has to do with law. It isn't as if—as if I'd taken a pistol and shot someone through the head—or broken into a house and stolen something!"

GERLIK'S mechanical voice sighed. "Obviously you haven't listened to the things we've tried to teach you. So listen now. We have close to nine thousand people in the colony. Survival isn't easy—New Eden is not a fertile planet—and will get harder as we grow. Violent people aren't the type we need. We need people willing to cooperate. The alternative is more and more lawkeeps and more and more of the colony's potential wasted. Matters are bad enough at this point. Do you know the colony's average growth over the last twenty-five years?"

Kreg said impatiently, "A third of a percent a year."

"Right." The voice fell briefly silent. "Tomsun, such a statistic may mean nothing to you. To us—to the Brains—it's highly distressing. We're not going to live forever and the fissionables won't last forever. A time limit exists. Within it we must build a colony capable of surviving on its own. Its people must not collapse into wars and anarchy. Here's a statistic, Tomsun, that you may not have heard—we've had to exile, for various kinds of violence or other antisocial behavior, a little over one-half of one percent of total population per year! At present we're shrinking, not growing.

There's a dilemma—do we ruthlessly weed out the unsuitable, or do we keep the marginal ones in favor of growth?"

KREG waited sullenly for the voice to resume. When it didn't he said, "It seems to me you go pretty far toward weeding out anyone with a little spirit."

Gerlik caught him up. "Spirit? Have we ever exiled anyone for peaceful competition? Do we prohibit arguing as long as nothing harder than words is thrown?"

"No, but—well, you're damned hard on girls!"

The voice sighed. "Now you're talking about morals. Of course, we uphold moral standards—they're part and parcel of the kind of society we need. Tomsun, we're wandering from your own case. Do you have any new facts to present?"

"No."

"Then the sentence will have to stand. Exile,"

Kreg found himself on his feet. "Why don't you just shoot me? Why maintain this farce of exile? Do you think it's civilized to let people starve outside or go blind from the sun, die of thirst or be killed by predators?"

"Or," the voice said calmly, "kill each other. Don't forget that part. Yes, we're being civilized. We're sparing your fellow colonists the job of executing you or of guarding and supporting you in prison—or caring for you after a brainwashing. And you don't have to die automatically once you're exiled. Exes do survive; lots of them. Now, Tomsun, this is all the time I can give you. When you leave Nose Cone—"

Kreg said desperately, "I have a right to make a bequest and choose an executor."

Gerlik sighed. "Choose, then."

"I choose my great-uncle!"

"All right. You know his compartment."

II

UNCLE BEN TOMSUN—so known to the whole family—was the only one of the Brains who hadn't been born either on the Ship or on Earth itself. He had been born on New Eden and had lived there seventy-three years.

He greeted Kreg quietly. "I can't say how sorry I am. I had great hopes for you. Why couldn't you have held your temper? Are a few taunts all that important?"

Kreg, standing, gripped the chair back. "Ben, don't talk like the rest of them. Can't you see that it's not fair? No matter how hard I tried, someone would have goaded me into fighting. They'd have pushed as far as necessary, knowing I had had a Formal Warning, and now I'm being punished while they—"

Ben interrupted quietly, "Hold on, boy. They were all cited—

even the ones who never touched you, only looked on. Some got their second citations. They have to walk a tightrope from now on. And don't keep calling your sentence punishment—and don't call it unfair. Would it be fair to the orderly members of the colony to leave violent genes among them? Do you think we Brains could die knowing we had left the seeds of self-destruction in the colony?"

Kreg said furiously, "I was pushed farther than I could stand. I had to fight or—or admit I wasn't a man. Can't you understand that?"

Ben said quietly, "No, I can't. What harm would it have done you to have swallowed your pride? To my way of thinking to have done so would have been the greater manhood. Can't *you* un-

"No."

"Then you're not a very bright young man."

KREG took two trembling steps and gripped the chair back again. For one red instant he wanted to lift it and swing it at the cabinet. Not that he could have done much harm—if he did succeed in breaking an eye the hidden weapons would blast him down and 'pairbots or attendants would come and carry his remains away and repair the sensor. Instead, he spoke in a low, shaky voice, "I don't see it as a question of brightness. I'm flesh and blood and I react accordingly. While you—"

Ben said with only a trace of sharpness in his artificial voice, "While I'm just a glandless hunk of protoplasm in a saturated sponge. Is that it?"

Now that it was said, Kreg wouldn't back down. "That's right. You've been that way so long you can't remember what it's like to be a man."

Ben said coolly, "You wanted to make a bequest. Get on with it."

Kreg said bitterly, "I own a few credits in the bank and some clothes. I bequeath the credits to you and the other Brains. Maybe you can buy some pin-up pictures for your compartment walls. I don't care what you do with the clothes. Wear them, if you can find a way!" He turned and ran out of the compartment.

He thought he heard a chuckle behind him.

THE gravcar settled onto loose sandy soil. Kreg stared at the quilltrees growing sparsely in a shallow ravine that led southward. His neutral-gray goggles did not distort colors, but he could see little green in the spiny joshua-treelike things—they were off-white like dry old bones. They and the kitchgrass were the only vegetation in sight.

He climbed wordlessly from the car and accepted the felt-covered canteen and the bundle of rations

one lawkeep handed him. He already had, in a thick compartmented belt, a supply of salt, some antibiotic tablets and a burning-glass for making fire. The only weapon allowed him was a knife in a scabbard.

The second lawkeep said, not unkindly, "That ravine will have water a few miles south. You'd better stay here until night, though—a group of exes was sighted not far down a few days ago. They might not be hospitable."

Kreg stood and watched the car rise, then dart north. A hundred and fifty miles was estimate of the distance they'd brought him. Too far to walk back, even if something other than a bullet waited at the fence.

He turned listlessly toward the ravine. Insects buzzed in saffron sunlight made bearable by his goggles. The heat was already striking through his loose white garments. He moved hesitantly toward the nearest big quilltree. Predators weren't supposed to range this far north, but he wasn't sure. And exiles might ambush him for the things he had.

He sat down in the quilltree's slim shadow. Winged insects flew away from him. He opened the canteen and drank sparingly, though the dryness of the air made him want to gulp mouthfuls. The desert smelled dusty and the quilltree smelled like hot grease. Something—those locustlike insects, maybe—had an odor of thymol.

There were no feathered birds on New Eden, but now that the gravcar was gone things like slender four-inch winged lizards began to flit about, catching insects. Kinches, they were called. He had heard that starving exes sometimes ate them. They did not tempt him—they looked like tight twists of dry gray paper, with cellophane wings.

NIGHT came and the air cooled a little. Neither moon was in sight but the stars were brilliant.

The brightest point of light in the sky was not a star. Kreg lay on his back, staring up at it. Main Hull, it was—practically all of the Ship except Nose Cone. Originally it had been left in a standing orbit directly above Landington, but by now it had lagged a little and skewed off to the west, so it was below the zenith. The living quarters, schools, clinics and amusement centers had been in Main Hull, along with most of hydroponics and ship's machinery, including the main drives. The passengers landing in Nose Cone, must have been crowded. He wondered how long it would be before Main Hull's orbit decayed enough to bring it down as a meteor. Thousands of years perhaps. It seemed a shame to waste all that metal, but landing it would have used up a lot of fissionables.

Something—a kinch—crawled

onto his hand. Startled, he threw it off, then rose to his feet and moved cautiously downravine.

Mostly, the ground between quilltrees was too sandy to support much growth, but here and there, in richer pockets, kitchgrass grew. The individual plant was like a small sprout of asparagus with five oval leaves arranged radially around its base. Where enough moisture existed the grass formed an almost complete cover. Kreg, pausing to peer ahead, stooped, plucked one of the sprouts and chewed on it. The taste was mildly bitter; the texture dry and pithy; only when it first sprouted was the stuff succulent. After a minute he spat it out and took a sip from his canteen. Then he trudged on.

Eight or nine miles downravine, where the quilltrees grew more thickly, he suddenly stopped, crouching beside one of the spiny trunks. From ahead came a rumble of sound like many feet pounding. The sound grew rapidly. Thoroughly scared, he ran for the nearer side of the ravine and struggled up the loose slope, sliding back one step for every two he gained, slipping often to hands and knees. Finally, gaining level ground, he ran to a small hummock and threw himself down beside it where he could watch the ravine. In the starlight he could see plainly the marks he had left on the slope. Dare he stay here?

But it was too late to get up and run. A couple of hundred yards ahead he saw swift movement among the quilltrees. He lay still, trying not to breathe audibly—then realized that the thunder of the stampede would drown out any noise he made.

THEY were hellrunners. He recognized them though he had seen only three or four such creatures in his life from gravcars. This closeup view of a whole herd was awesome.

The bodies, from the thrusting snouts to the tips of the long heavy tails, were as much as fifteen feet long and reptilian. But unlike the Terran crocodiles in old movies, these New Eden creatures did not crawl on four legs. Instead they ran in swift long strides on two mightily muscled hind limbs, their bodies parallel to the ground and fifty inches or more above it, the tails balancing the foreparts. Great three-toed feet drummed upon the soil and sent it flying. The relatively puny forelimbs were clutched against the pumping chests. The heads, hardly bigger than a man's though more elongated, swayed on long necks as the hurtling creatures swerved among the quilltrees and darted looks ahead. Kreg shivered, thinking of the strength needed to keep those heavy bodies balanced parallel to the ground.

Behind the big males in the lead came the females and the young,

running more gracefully. A rear guard of young males twisted their heads about to watch the trail behind. Kreg pressed himself close to the ground, fearing some monstrous pursuer of the fleeing herd. But the last of the herd passed, including a straggler or two, and the thunder diminished up the ravine with no sign of pursuit.

He lay there until the ravine was quiet again, then dusted off his garments and began to walk along the edge of the slope. He didn't think he wanted to go down among the quilltrees again.

Suddenly figures loomed before him. He crouched, reaching hesitantly for his knife, but a voice said, "Hold it right there, newie," and he saw spears ready.

III

FOR a minute nothing more was said and no one moved. Kreg gave a start as a menacing bellow sounded from upravine. The exile who had spoken before—a dark-bearded man of perhaps forty, as tall as Kreg but very lean—grinned in the starlight. "Relax. That's one of our sentries, keeping those hell-runners moving. We want the ravine to ourselves for a while. When did you come out?"

"About noon."

"What for?"

"Fistfighting."

"Oh, yes? Are you pretty good with your fists?"

Kreg shrugged. "I never made a study of it. I didn't look for the fights."

"I see," the bearded man said casually. "What's your name?"

Kreg rejected an impulse to say it was none of the man's business. "Tomsun."

"Tomsun? Which family are you? The one related to the Brain?"

"That's right."

The spokesman grunted. "Does your family still spend a lot of time visiting Uncle Ben?"

Kreg said irritably, "As much as ever I guess. Why? Are you a Tomsun?"

"No. I just wondered if you'd been in Nose Cone quite a bit. And why Uncle Ben let this happen to you."

Kreg, his anger at the Brains stirring within him, said, "I've been in and out of Nose Cone since before I could pronounce it. The last two years I've been an apprentice attendant. But Uncle Ben seemed to agree with the other Brains that it's antisocial for a man to stand up to a challenge."

The spokesman stared at Kreg. Then he muttered something under his breath, sighed and said, "All right. I'll tell you how it is with us. We're not the most lawless tribe of exes, but we don't recruit weaklings. You can come in with us tentatively, but you'll have to contribute those supplies you've got, carry your weight and stick by our rules. If you decline, you'll have to

stay away from this ravine. I wouldn't swap much for your chances in that case."

Kreg said woodenly, "It doesn't sound as if I had much choice. If you want the knife and the goggles and salt and antibiotics, I guess you can take them."

The spokesman said patiently, "We won't take them. We don't care to compel anyone to join us. We want willing recruits—any other kind are too much trouble. There's another ravine fifteen miles east that you could reach before sunup."

"I guess I'd be a fool to decline your offer."

"Fine," the bearded man said. "My name's Pendergast. This is Nujent and this is—"

BEFORE morning Kreg understood the stampede of hellrunners. Pendergast's exes had started it. They had with them the intact cured skins of two huge quadruped carnivores, somewhat like Terran lions in form but much bigger and scaly rather than furred. Two men in a skin could move it fast enough and imitate the living beast's bellow well enough to stampede a herd of the non-carnivorous hellrunners. In this particular instance, the purpose was dual: to chase them away from a waterhole and to kill a few stragglers for meat. The meat, now sizzling on spits over open fires, tasted like chicken, though it was tougher. The water in the stagnant pool, which was shaded by a thick growth of quilltrees and some round-leaved shootlike things, had to be settled, decanted and boiled before it was drinkable. Kreg threaded his way along a prickly-bordered hellrunner trail to look at that pool. He didn't hear Pendergast behind him until the trek leader spoke. "Wondering how water stays here into the dry season?"

"Yes."

The bearded man kneeled and swished murky water. "The hellrunners—or people, now that we're here—keep holes dug out. You'll notice that raised rim of dirt. In a low pocket of a ravine like this, where quilltrees grow this thick, you'll almost always find ground water if you dig down a ways. Seepage will keep the hole filled."

Kreg nodded. "I understand there's an actual lake somewhere south."

"Yes." In the early light Pendergast's eyes showed gray and Kreg could see a strip of less tanned skin across his eyes and nose. "Sixty miles downravine. Lake Salvation, we call it. That's where our tribe is."

"How big is the tribe?"

"About four hundred, including a few offshoots that live elsewhere."

"Oh. That big?" Kreg pondered a moment. Then: "Isn't this pretty far to come on a hunt?"

Pendergast looked faintly surprised. "The hunt's incidental. We are a trading expedition."

"What do you trade?"

"Salt, for one thing—there are pockets in the ravine—and water. We take metal in return. You'll be going with us, unless you want to trek sixty miles downravine alone."

"No, thanks. Where are we going and with whom will we trade?"

"There are a half-dozen small tribes west of here, who mine metals and don't have salt or enough water of their own. We'll make the circuit, then head back down another ravine to the lake. Now, as to your stuff." The trek leader glanced at Kreg's belt. "You may as well wear that and the goggles until we get home. There'll be people at the lake who need the goggles worse than you do, but the rest of us on this trek are used to slits. Nujent will take the knife because he knows how to use it better than any of us. Did you ever carry a backpack?"

"No."

"It'll take a little getting used to. We won't give you too much—say, about three gallons of water plus your own canteen and your share of the cooked meat. It won't be an easy trek for you, this first time, but you look healthy."

Kreg said, "I'll keep up."

KREG brought the strength of the expedition to twenty-one. He noticed that he was carrying the lightest burden—most of the others had six or eight gallons of water, in thin leather bags that didn't leak or sweat. Still, what he had was none too little. The extra weight tired him quickly and made his feet and his back muscles ache. The packstraps rubbed his shoulders raw. He was always thirsty and he hated the caked dust on his skin, but he stuck grimly to the pint-a-day water ration.

The slits Pendergast had mentioned were carved wooden goggles with horizontal openings. The exes seemed to find them little nuisance, but the head-bobbing to raise and lower the field of view was odd. There were other strange things too: the sun fence—a long sheet of leather erected on poles during daylight stops; the probing ahead on downslopes with staffs to avoid loose pockets of dirt beneath thin crusts; the winding routes that took the group to leeward of hills. All had the purpose of avoiding unnecessary perspiration; for example, after one tumble down a slope, Kreg understood the value of the staffs.

When the country was fairly level they traveled at night. When it was not they traveled during the day, the better to avoid treacherous footing and dangerous animals.

Once they did encounter a herd of hellrunners. Kreg—because he had the goggles—saw them first.

The expedition was crossing a ravine that had only a scattering of quilltrees. The big creatures were browsing slowly along, heads rising and bodies lifting as they nibbled daintily at comparatively tender quills atop the trees. He must have jerked his head around quickly enough to alert Pendergast, for the trek leader was beside him at once, gripping his arm. "Turn slowly and walk upravine. "Don't hurry and don't look back."

Kreg, after a hesitant moment, complied. From the corners of his goggles he could see the other men walking slowly to either side. They must have gone a quarter-mile before Pendergast said, "All right. Out of the ravine now. They've decided we're no threat."

Kreg started up the slope. Suddenly he stopped, staring to his right. "Doesn't that look like—" But Pendergast and others were already striding to where Kreg pointed.

IT WAS a body, all right—that of a newie, obviously not long dead, dressed as Kreg had been when first set down. The expedition gathered to stare silently.

The man—older than Kreg—had left tracks from the north. He had apparently stopped to sleep and something had crept up on him. His throat was torn open and part of one shoulder was eaten away. Blood had soaked into the ground. There were fang marks on his forearms as if he had tried to shield his throat, but the standard knife was in its scabbard.

Pendergast stooped to unbuckle the belt. Two other men hoisted the corpse so the belt could be pulled free. The first thing Pendergast did then was unsnap the goggles compartment and take out the goggles, which began to darken rapidly, adjusting to the daylight. "I'll wear these if no one objects."

The others nodded. Nujent picked up the canteen and shook it. "He drank most of his water the first day."

Kreg, resenting the calm acceptance of the tragedy, demanded, "How do you know it was only one day?"

Pendergast gave him a glance through the newly acquired goggles. "He's only one day's walk from where he'd have been set down. This seems to bother you. Know him?"

"No, but—"

The trek leader shrugged. "It's too bad he got himself killed, but it was his own fault. He should have rested during the day and trekked at night, as you did. Then he wouldn't have been sneaked up on."

Kreg supposed that was so. "What killed him?"

"A gollycat. They skulk around herds of hellrunners, picking off the young or stragglers. Not the biggest predator you'll see here,

but the size of leopards. Scaly quadrupeds."

Kreg said impatiently, "I've seen pictures of them. But this man could have been warned more thoroughly, or set down in a safer place."

The exes were all looking at Kreg now. After a minute Pendergast said, "There are a couple of us here who know how you feel—I was exiled myself twelve years ago. Most of the others were born in the tribe. To them, a newie doesn't mean much until he's proved himself. Understand?"

Kreg looked around at the impassive men. "I guess so. But— the same thing could have happened to me. I wasn't warned about gollycats either. I thought they only lived east of the colony, in the Sunrise Hills."

Nujent, grinning, put in, "We aren't any greater admirers of the system, or of the Brains, than you are, even if we've never talked to them. Why do you think we live in the desert? The Sunrise Hills aren't as fertile as the colony land, but they're a lot better than this."

Kreg looked at the slits of Nujent's wooden goggles. "I don't know why you live as you do. Why do you?"

"Because the Brains won't let us have so much as a rifle to fight off predators. And predators are thick in the hills. A few years ago an uncle of mine got together the materials for gunpowder and hammered together a crude sort of cannon. About the fourth time he fired it, lawkeeps from the colony descended and took it away."

Kreg said nothing. That was the law, of course—exes could not own guns. He hadn't known, though, that exiles had ambition enough, or organization enough, to make gunpowder and a crude cannon.

IV

THE first trading was with a small tribe—two families totaling fourteen individuals—that lived in caves in the side of a ravine. The caves were actually the mines. From those mines came red iron ore that the tiny tribe smelted, using charcoal as the reducing agent, in an intriguing crude oven built of quartz crystals. The product was ingots of gray steel, pitted and grainy. The tribe had a well that produced insufficient water and they sold Pendergast twenty-four ingots for two six-gallon skins of water.

What a contrast the metal was, Kreg mused, to the stock of stainless steel and other alloys stored in Nose Cone!

The next two tribes were hardly different from the first. A night's trek beyond the third tribe, though, brought the expedition to a larger one—close to fifty individuals—that had, besides iron, a bronze alloy and some copper and lead. All but a little of the trading wa-

ter went there. Now Kreg had to carry ingots in his backpack.

They started on westward at sundown. At the first stop Kreg swallowed his mouthful of water and lay down on his back. Main Hull was just beginning to dim as it entered shadow.

Pendergast sat down beside him. "Here we are, trekking for days to buy a few pounds of metal, while all that high-grade steel hangs up there in the sky! I wonder if it'll all burn up when it falls. If not, I suppose the colony's descendants will grab what's left."

Kreg glanced at the bearded man. "You mean, you don't think your own descendants will have a chance at it?"

"Do you?"

Kreg, uncomfortable, knew this conversation was deliberate. "I suppose not, now that I think about it."

Pendergast chuckled. "You said *your* descendants, though. Don't you expect to have any? Or don't you think of yourself as an exile yet?"

Kreg's face grew warm. "I guess I've never thought about having descendants. When they sent me out . . . "

The trek leader said, "There's a fairly even balance of men and women among us and you don't look like a potential bachelor to me. I have two sons and a daughter. I think a lot about them and about the children they'll have. Some day the Brains will finish this weeding out they preach, and let the colony expand. I wonder about what'll happen to my descendants then. I think they'll simply be pushed aside."

Kreg, not liking the subject, didn't answer, and the older man let it rest there.

THE next trading site was in a shallow ravine that had almost no kitchgrass and few quilltrees. The mine holes were there, but the tribe was missing.

The expedition, after studying footprints that led downravine, set up the sun fence and stopped to discuss things. Nujent came back from looking at the local well. "Low, but not completely dry, so that wasn't why they left. Damn it—another metal-source gone! Why don't we organize some ambushes and capture a grav car or two? We could fly them until the power gave out, then break them up for metal."

Kreg saw Pendergast's sharp look at Nujent and didn't miss the ensuing exaggerated silence—or Nujent's furtive look at Kreg. He felt his face grow warm. What was going on? Did they—could they—suspect he was a spy? Ridiculous! Why would the Brains want spies among the exiles?

Nujent was saying, "If they'd intended to be back they'd have left a message. I'm for taking what metal's around."

Pendergast said, "We could do that. Still, there *is* a chance they might come back—or some of them might. We've got water we don't need for getting home. I think we ought to put it in what airtight containers we have and cache it here. That way they're paid for the metal, whatever happens. And if they don't come back the cache of water will keep. We might find it handy on the next expedition."

Nujent shrugged. "Just so we get the metal."

Four nights downravine they found the first graves.

The missing tribe left no mystery here. A note, scrawled in charcoal upon a piece of leather hung on a cross, read, "Epidemic. No medicine. We're trying for the lake, but had to stop here two days, and nine out of seventeen died. Four others sick, but able to go on." The signature was, "Stan Peters, Mayor."

Two of the nine graves were children's.

PENDERGAST hung the note back on the grave. "If we'd only been a few days earlier the antibiotics would have—"

Kreg asked hesitantly, "What kind of disease do you suppose it was?"

The trek leader gestured vaguely. "There are several that hit people in the desert. One's something like very bad measles. Another's like diphtheria. The standard antibiotic is effective against all of them."

Nujent muttered, "If you have any of it."

Pendergast glanced at the sky. "Two hours till morning. I'm for trekking straight through until we catch them."

No one demurred. They hurried on, alternating between a shuffling trot—the best pace they could manage, laden as they were —and a slow walk to catch breath. Sweat covered Kreg; and he was desert-minded enough now to be disturbed about it. He stubbornly resisted the yearning to drink and after a while he stopped sweating. Now he felt like a dry leaf. He stared in vague horror at his hands —the very flesh seemed to have shrunk. The pulse in his muggy head was hot and noisy and his limbs trembled with weakness.

Some time after noon they rounded a bend and found the eight survivors sprawled in what shade was available.

Stan Peters was one of the four sick and in no condition to talk. Except for the slow rise and fall of his chest and an occasional twitch he seemed dead, but a few drops of water on his swollen, parched tongue brought a moan and a stir.

Kreg helped erect the sun fence and drag the victims into its shade. Pendergast went among them with a waterbag. Kreg noted that not one of them—even the youngest child—gulped. As badly off as they

were, they had the self-control to sip meagerly.

When all had been revived enough to swallow antibiotic tablets from Kreg's belt a brief council was held. The decision was that Nujent and four others would stay behind to help the survivors along when they were able to travel, while Pendergast and the bulk of the expedition went on ahead.

They started at sundown. Three nights' travel took them to Lake Salvation.

KREG hadn't known there was any such growth of vegetation in Hidry Desert.

The entire shallow bowl was perhaps fifteen miles across, the lake occupying the hub. The entire land area was wooded. Quilltrees grew on the slopes, while the flat bottom was choked with tall straight round-leaved trees resembling Terran poplars. Kitchgrass formed a lush carpet; insects and kinches swarmed above it. There were small rabbitlike quadrupeds—not furry but scaled—and once Kreg saw, darting between the trees, a dozen predators more or less feline in shape and about as big as a lynx. They, too, were furless.

There were no birds, but he saw winged reptiles bigger than the kinches, and gliding quadrupeds.

The only edible fruit—to which Pendergast introduced him on the way—were tiny round things that grew in clusters. They tasted like peaches except for an alumlike quality that made Kreg's mouth pucker. The trek leader grinned.

"They're moist at least. Terran transplants would grow here if the colony would part with any. There's a good layer of soil, moist enough a few feet down. It's not salty—there must be enough underground drainage to prevent that. We could support a fair-sized population here."

Kreg stared along the trail they were following. "Is your—I mean our—tribe the only one here?"

Pendergast shook his head. "We're the biggest, but there are four others scattered around the lake. Plus some roving bands that summer here. We have our own sector, which includes the ravine where we met you. Others claim other ravines. A ravine, especially one with ground water, is a sort of highway. A tribe naturally trades with an area that can be reached from its own ravine. Practically the whole population of Hidry Desert lives within a hundred miles of the lake."

Kreg looked southward, but the far rim of the basin hid the country beyond. "It can't be more than five hundred miles in that direction to South Sea."

"No," Pendergast agreed, "and it's only a hundred and eighty to Salterra Escarpment. You could travel that far in the rainy season —if you call six or seven inches of

rain rainy. Below that the land is one salt flat, an old seabed, and there's practically no rain from South Sea."

Kreg said, "But there are other continents. And some day when the colony expands—"

The bearded exile smiled. "Some day, yes—if there are still fissionables in Nose Cone and if the machinery is still working. But long before then our descendants will have been—as I said before—shoved aside."

V

KREG was surprised at the way the tribe lived.

There were no shelters except sun shades. A family site consisted of sleeping pads in some tree clump, some pegs in tree trunks to hang things on and perhaps a hanging shelf to keep things away from children or small animals. Possessions included a few garments for warding off sun, some cooking utensils and a rack of weapons—spears, bows, knives. And, of course, waterbags.

The whole settlement was strung along a small tongue of lake jutting into the ravine.

The food had little variety. Fish or other meat was a staple. Bread was made from dried and pulverized quilltree roots. The single fruit provided a beverage—the juice, boiled with a certain bark then settled, lost its astringency. It could be fermented and usually was.

There were children of all ages and adults. Kreg found himself ogling the wrong girls and drawing haughty looks from them and menacing scowls from young men, until he learned what kind of hairbraids meant marriage or engagement.

The work was necessarily hard. Kreg, assigned to a camp of young bachelors, went on hunts, fished for solelike creatures in the lake, dug roots, carried waterbags, and the like. There was vague talk of his learning some such trade as metalworking, but for now his young strong back was sufficient.

Nujent had arrived several days behind him, shepherding all but one of the rescued group. The one had died along the way. Stan Peters and the other sick were recovering.

Excited by their arrival, Pendergast had gone into hurried council with Peters and Nujent; then Pendergast and Nujent had left, taking with them some small leather-wrapped bundles. They had returned a day later without the bundles and without explanation. Kreg, who had found occasion to talk to Pendergast afterward, had discovered the lean, bearded man oddly distracted. He hadn't asked questions.

Forty or fifty days went by. Kreg was accepted now—no one treated him like an outsider. He began to

spend what free time he had at the tribe's forge, where the acquired metal and some worn-out cooking utensils were being fashioned into new things. His old life in the colony seemed distant.

ONE day six gravcars appeared over the lake.

Kreg happened to be fishing and saw them at once. His midriff went taut. These were four-place lawkeep cars and, though he could see no weapons, he presumed the cars to be armed. What did they want?

The sun glinted on something—cameras. He stayed where he was, watching, while the cars slowly circled the lake. Why this survey? The colony already had pictures of the lake.

Then the small flotilla came directly toward him. He looked around nervously, saw no one else in sight and rejected an urge to run. One of the cars dropped to hover a few yards out and the canopy slid back. Now he could see rifle barrels. The lawkeeps stared at him as if he were an alien. Finally one spoke. "How many exiles live around this lake?"

Kreg hesitated. "I don't know. I've only been here a little while."

The lawkeep scowled. "Is that so? How many tribes are there?"

"Four, I guess."

"Where *do* you live, if you don't live here?"

Kreg felt himself flush. "I live here now. I was just exiled the middle of spring."

The four occupants of the car looked surprised. Then the spokesman grinned. "Well, how many people would you *guess* live here?"

Kreg wondered what to say. "A couple hundred—maybe a few more. I haven't seen many."

The spokesman said something to the others, then made a gesture. Kreg could see him using a hand-microphone. The canopy slid shut and the car rose. The six cars took up a formation radial to the lake and began a circle over the surrounding woods. Kreg picked up what fish he had and hurried toward Pendergast's living site.

The bearded ex was standing in a small clear area, chest moving as if he'd just been running, staring after the gravcars. His family peered nervously from cover. Pendergast turned quickly to Kreg. "Did you see them?"

"I sure did. They flew around the lake taking pictures, then came down and asked me questions."

"How many were there? What kind of cars? What did they want?"

"They want to know how many people live here."

The bearded man grunted. "What did you tell them?"

"I said I was new and that I guessed two hundred."

Pendergast grinned. "That was all right. But what do you guess they are doing now?"

"I saw cameras aimed straight down—and some other instruments. I'd say they're running a photo-map of the basin. Also—well, the cars carry infrared detectors, that can find a person through foliage. They could be trying to get a count on us."

Pendergast sighed. "I imagine that's it. I'm going to where I can keep an eye on them. Will you find Nujent and Peters? Tell them I want to see them up near the rim."

KREG didn't see Pendergast again until the next day.

"Tomsun, we want you to attend a council. Don't mention it to anybody."

Kreg waited while Pendergast rounded up some family heads who served as elders of the tribe. The small group walked up the ravine almost to the rim of the basin, then turned off along a game trail. Presently they joined other men in a quilltree thicket. Nujent and Peters were there.

Pendergast opened the talk. "This is secret. We're worried about the colony's intentions. This is the first time they've ever tried to take a head count or survey the basin." He sat brooding for a moment, then looked at Kreg. "Tomsun, we're as sure now as we'll ever be that you're not a spy. Anyway, we're taking the risk because we need you. For some time we've had a vague plan to raid the colony for weapons and things. What we've been waiting for is someone familiar enough with Nose Cone and the area around it to fill in certain details for us—and to do certain things inside. Events seem to be pushing us right now. Are you willing to take part?"

Kreg stared at the man. "Raid the colony? You can't be serious. How would you even get close to it, let alone through the fence?"

Pendergast told him, "We'd have teams going north ahead of time to bury caches of water and food. And we think we can sneak in."

"But the lawkeeps—"

Nujent put in tensely. "That's one thing we who were born here don't know about. Would lawkeeps have guts enough to fight? And how about repair robots? Could they use guns?"

Kreg felt bewildered. "Uh—the 'pairbots couldn't aim guns with much accuracy. The lawkeeps would fight—don't get the idea that *all* the courage has been weeded out of the colony. They'd be under direct orders of the Brains, anyway."

Pendergast said impatiently, "Nujent, we're not going to try to storm in. Tomsun, what do you think—if we got into Nose Cone disguised as citizens and seized control, could we raid the arsenal and get enough weapons? And what else would we be up against?"

Kreg stared dazedly at the taut

faces. "You've seen Nose Cone, Pendergast. It was built to withstand centuries in space—if necessary. It's a virtual fortress. Once you got inside, if the access doors were closed you'd be trapped."

The bearded exile grinned. "We are planning on that. Tell me—would a heavy pistol bullet penetrate those cabinets the Brains are in?"

Kreg gasped. After a moment he said hoarsely, "I—I'm sure it would. But—"

PENDERGAST leaned toward him tensely. "You know the power lines and the control boards, don't you? You were an apprentice."

"I know as much as attendants are taught."

Pendergast said fiercely, "Well, will you go along with us? Or would you rather wait until they come down here and drive us away from the lake?"

Kreg tried to avoid the burning eyes. He found he had trouble breathing. "I—okay, I'm not grateful for being exiled. But I think your plan is insane!"

Pendergast relaxed a little. "Maybe you'll think differently when you've heard the whole scheme." He turned to Nujent, who handed him the four leather-wrapped bundles Kreg has seen before. Pendergast began unwrapping one. "Stan Peters and his tribe dug these out of a mine. They've been buried for thousands of years—maybe hundreds of thousands." He pulled away the last wrapping and held up an object.

Kreg's skin prickled. The artifact was not man-made—it was too corroded, too caked with sand aggregate. It must have been on New Eden a long time, as Pendergast said. It had been, Kreg guessed, some kind of communicator—something like the compact two-way radios gravcars had. There was one badly distorted coil of wire in a few heavy turns; other shapes that might be multiple-turn coils. Kreg recognized the remains of a variable condenser and things that might be tubes and transistors.

Pendergast unwrapped another bundle. Kreg could make nothing of the artifact. Pendergast said, "This was a device for condensing moisture from the air. Not much use here, if the climate was always as dry as it is now—but better than nothing. The point is—some race landed here. They may have colonized or they may not. Possibly whole cities will be dug up some day—old spaceships, maybe. Here's how these artifacts tie in with our plan: by having these things found away from Nose Cone, we can divert enough attention from the fence to let us slip in."

Nujent was impatiently offering the other two small bundles. Pen-

dergast grinned, took them and unwrapped one.

Kreg gasped with the rest. There was no need to guess what these were! They hadn't been shaped for human hands—rather, perhaps for tentacles or some kind of claws—but they were pistols. The handles were nearly cylindrical, coarsely knurled, and set at an obtuse angle to the barrels. But they were pistols. There was no caked sand on them—obviously they'd recently been cleaned up with great care.

Pendergast said, "We've been secretly hoarding five pistols for years. These two more give us the seven minimum for our plan."

Kreg heard his own awed voice. "Will they shoot? Is there ammunition?"

Pendergast grinned. "Yes to both questions."

VI

PREPARATIONS took many days. Spring sweltered into summer. Waterholes away from the lake showed new rims of dirt pawed out by hellrunners. What little green the quilltrees had, bleached out to an ivory white and the quills began to curl with dryness.

Gravcars flew high over the basin twice. Kreg lived in half dread, half eagerness for the thing he'd agreed to do.

At last the time came and he started upravine with Pendergast, Nujent, Peters and two dozen others. The trip was long and hard, but the day came when he lay sweltering under camouflage, peering out at an irregular horizon. He had never seen Desolation Ridge from this side before. The south slope was surprisingly short.

When night came Pendergast's men would climb it and look down the much longer slope to South Fence. Before morning they would either have gotten what they wanted from the colony or be dead.

Nujent and three others had left them last night, angling east, taking the alien communicator and the moisture-collector. Now that the time was near, the whole idea seemed idiotic to Kreg. How much diversion would Nujent create at most? A few gravcars and lawkeeps, a theoretician or two. And certainly little time would be lost bringing the artifacts to the colony—probably to Research Center, six blocks from Nose Cone.

Still, he supposed it was better than nothing.

He squirmed, seeking a more comfortable position.

FROM atop Desolation Ridge he stared down at the distant lights. He could locate Nose Cone by the dogleg of the fence, but couldn't make out the huge bullet shape. Inside, the lights of Landington stretched northward; and

beyond, distant glows marked a few farm-centers. He could trace the course of Thirsty River from its eastern entry at the Sunrise Hills and along its irregular curve through the colony. North Fence, of course, was out of sight, thirty miles away.

Pendergast hissed at him. "Nujent must be on station. Let's start down!"

Kreg rose to his feet, made sure the small bundle of civilized clothing was secure around his waist, and led off. Though he had seen this slope a thousand times, nothing about it seemed familiar now. He felt like a fly crawling down a well-lit wall. He told himself the sentries wouldn't be able to see him by mere starlight. He stumbled in a dry rill, caught himself and went more carefully. The rest of the party was spaced out behind him.

Pendergast whispered, "I see Nose Cone. As I remember, that warehouse was about two hundred yards west."

Kreg said, "A little farther than that. See the next fence light west of Nose Cone? Count four more. That's the warehouse."

"Right," Pendergast said. "Where's the gully?"

Kreg kneaded his memory. "About twenty yards past the warehouse. That puts it close to a light." He could see a sentry pacing. "Here's the beginning of the gully. We'd better crawl."

The gulch bottom was gravelly under his hands. Wings buzzed, barely above the threshold of audibility as startled kinches fled. He could feel the greater moisture of this air.

The sentry reached the end of his beat, peered around and started back. How dark did this slope look to him?

Kreg, tense to weakness, crawled on. The gully deepened, and he began to believe he might actually reach the fence. He believed, too, that, as Pendergast maintained, there would be a grill and culvert to let water in under the fence. But wouldn't it be a strong grill, permanently mounted? Strange. He had scampered along inside that fence, at that exact spot, in children's games and later paced sentry duty—and never wondered what happened to the water that came sparsely down the gully in winter. Surely it wasn't wasted. In the colony a buried conduit system collected even drain-off from roofs.

He threw a glance at the sentry —going away now—and crawled fast. He reached the end of the gully, just at the fence, twisted his head and saw his companions flattening themselves.

He paused.

Pendergast crawled up beside him. "I told you so! The grill's hinged—and padlocked!" The bearded man grinned and brandished a small crowbar.

THE culvert was tight enough to impede crawling. Kreg had to keep his elbows at his sides and squirm forward. His heart still pounded from the noise the breaking padlock had made. He could hear the men behind him grunting with effort and gasping for breath. The culvert smelled dusty. His hands were raw. He must, he thought, be far inside the fence—past the big warehouse. How much farther did the culvert go without a turn or intersection? Would a welded grill stop Pendergast?

He wondered how Nujent was doing. Suppose the Brains, suspicious, had Nugent and his companions interrogated under drugs?

He suddenly became aware of a faint, diffuse glow ahead. Sheer primitive dread of this black pipe made him wriggle ahead like a desperate caterpillar. He got close enough to look up a vertical shaft and see, through an ample grill, bright stars. He went limp, lungs gasping in breath. Pendergast's head bumped into his feet.

Would the manhole above be fastened? He squirmed onto his back, bent his body into the outlet, felt about and encountered welded handholds. He went up until he could push at the grill. It was heavy, but it iifted. He hesitated, decided there was nothing to lose and carefully pushed the grill free, sliding it aside. The surface outside sounded and felt like gravel. Cautiously, he thrust his head out. They were in a yard of some kind. He recognized dim shapes as gravcars and parts of gravcars. From somewhere beyond a dark wall came muffled voices. He climbed out.

Pendergast was quickly beside him. "Where are we?"

"In the back yard of a garage and hangar where Nose Cone's official gravcars are serviced. I've never been here before, but that gate opens onto a side street."

Evidently no word of the alien artifacts had gotten out to the citizenry yet. The few people on the streets strolled casually. He glanced up at the stars. Nearly midnight, he thought. A shift would let out then and the streets would fill. A certain number of citizens would converge on Nose Cone to idle through the museum displays before going home. That might help or hinder.

He smoothed his clothes and walked slowly toward the plaza, trying to avert his face when he met anybody. He had to give Pendergast and a few others time to get ahead of him.

BY THE time he reached the plaza, he knew there was some excitement. People began moving faster and he caught snatches of excited talk. A gravcar rose from the hangar behind him and moved eastward along the fence. Another followed.

He paused at the edge of the plaza. He did not dare wait any longer. He strode toward Access Three, recognized the attendant there, went past with averted face and approached Access Four. The man on duty was a stranger. Kreg, trying to keep his face calm, nodded to him and walked in.

Perhaps four dozen people were in the Rotunda. Some were gathering in a knot. He heard an excited voice say, "Just fell down!" That would be one of his own companions, drawing attention. Kreg hurried around the periphery toward a door marked PERSONNEL ONLY. It burst open and four attendants ran out —two of them familiar. He shrank against the wall. When they were past he pushed open the door and went through. The down-ramp was empty—but when he reached the next deck down he met a 'pair-bot. The thing's wheels swiveled toward him and the machine said tonelessly, "Visitors not permitted here, sir."

Kreg fought down panic. He gave his old apprentice's number and said hastily, "A citizen has fainted in the Rotunda. They'll be bringing him to our infirmary!"

The machine was silent for a moment—doubtless consulting a Brain—then it rolled out of his way. He hurried past, praying it hadn't flashed a picture of his face to the Brain. But no one came to intercept him. He passed doors marked JANITORIAL DEPOSITORY, LECTURE MACHINERY, PERSONNEL INFIRMARY. He glanced back along the curved corridor. It was empty.

He paused before the door marked ROTUNDA CONTROLS, took a deep breath and pushed it open.

No one was on duty—the standby attendant must be one of the four he'd met. He walked across the compartment, desperately willing his face to hide the tumult inside him. He sat down in the duty chair before the control console. If the autoviewers' picture of him didn't get the notice of a Brain for a few seconds . . . He picked up a voice reel that lay as if the attendant had been listening to it and pressed the stud. The narrator's voice said, "Once safely out of the burning forest, Jules Grayson ran toward Highway Forty-seven—"

Kreg's left hand stole toward a switch and flipped it.

The room went dark. Instantly he was out of the chair. For the benefit of the audio-monitors, he exclaimed, "What the—" Then he was at the trapdoor in one corner of the room. He bent and heaved it open; he almost jumped into the opening and put his feet on familiar rungs. Blue emergency lights had already flashed on. His feet touched a deck. Scanners would see him now, even in the dim standby light here. He leaped for a

control board—Nose Cone's main one—and grabbed for a master switch. It seemed to him he floated in slow motion. Why didn't the bullets come?

But his fingers closed on the switch handle and jerked it down.

VII

THE standby lights went out—but blue emergency lights flashed on, as they would do throughout Nose Cone. He heard relays slam home as the main power cut off. Now the general intercom was on and he could hear citizens screaming in the Rotunda, hear attendants shouting in various parts of the giant structure. One attendant called out, "Be calm! Please be orderly and stand where you are. Lights will be restored in a very few minutes."

Kreg jerked open panels, seized wires and tugged at them. They cut into his fingers, but some pulled loose—enough, he knew. He slammed the panels and ran for the ladder. He went up it like a squirrel, bunched himself and shoved the trapdoor open.

The corridor door was opening. Kreg leaped toward it, stopped a startled attendant with a stiff left, swung his right hard for the jaw. The man slumped to the floor. Kreg hesitated. Should he damage wiring here, too? No—let them guess for a while, if the Brains couldn't talk to them! He stepped over the unconscious man and turned left along the corridor. A few 'pairbots and attendants milled aimlessly. He shoved past them and ran for a ramp a fourth of the way around Nose Cone.

A babble of talk came from the intercom, some of it hysterical, but not a word from the Brains. Had he guessed wrong? Did they not, after all, have their own secret emergency communication network? Maybe they were just being cool—assessing information before they acted.

He dashed up the incline and along the higher corridor. Citizen's feet blundered about in the Rotunda over his head. He reached the compartment that belonged to Captain Gerlik's Brain; he hesitated from habit, then plunged in.

A man stood facing the Brain cabinet. In the dim blue light Kreg did not at once recognize Pendergast. The bearded exile flashed him a glance, then fixed his eyes on the cabinet again. The alien pistol in his hand aimed steadily where Kreg knew the Brain to be.

There was shaky triumph in Pendergast's voice. "Looks as if you did it, Tomsun. I half expected to be filled full of bullets the instant I stepped in here. But there hasn't been a sound."

Kreg suddenly realized the compartment's intercom was silent—the muffled commotion he heard was coming through decks and

bulkheads. "What happened in the Rotunda? Why didn't everyone run out?"

Pendergast chuckled. "Because the access doors slammed shut too quickly. You were right about that."

AND now, suddenly—making Kreg jump—Gerlik's voice came from the cabinet. "Of course. You didn't expect we'd be unprepared, did you? How did you get back inside the colony?"

Pendergast snarled, "That's our secret."

Gerlik's voice said, "I recognize you now—Martin Pendergast. You've lasted a long time in the desert."

Pendergast said harshly, "We don't want idle talk. In case you're not in contact with the other Brains, every one of them has a pistol pointed at it. You see the one pointed at you, don't you?"

"Yes, I see it. And I see the others. Naturally we're in contact. Some of the weapons look quite rusty—and two of them look odd. Are you sure they'll shoot?"

Pendergast said amusedly, "You don't think we failed to test them, do you? And the bullets will penetrate that thin steel in front of you."

Gerlik sighed, "No doubt. But what good would that do you? You can't control Nose Cone. You can't even get out—the doors won't open unless we open them."

Kreg said nervously, "Don't let him stall!"

Pendergast said, "In that case, Captain, we simply won't get out. This is the way it'll be: we have certain demands. If you don't meet them—fast—we'll put a bullet through each of you, and worry later about the doors."

Gerlik chuckled. "How heroic! What are these demands you're willing to die for?"

Pendergast's voice shook. "We want weapons. "We'll leave you enough to keep civil order in the colony, but we want the heavy stuff so we'll never have to worry about your intentions. We want metal, tools and medicines. And a few chemicals so we can exploit the land you've dumped us onto. You can keep this strip north of Desolation Ridge, including Sunrise Hills."

The Brain didn't answer at once. Then Gerlik said ironically, "Is that all? Why don't you demand Nose Cone? In fact, why don't you just set yourselves up as a ruling class?"

Pendergast grunted scornfully. "We don't want the kind of people *you* want. We don't even want the gravcars, except a few for exploration and emergencies. They won't last forever anyway—and neither will your fissionables. You can go your way and we'll go ours. Unless you bother us we won't even be talking to you!"

Another pause, then Gerlik said

stonily, "We'd be fools to take your word for that, even if we had to. Fortunately, we don't. Now, we're not going to waste time talking. You're locked in. When you get ready to surrender, we'll give you enough food and water to get back to Lake Salvation. And the next time you come north you'll be killed on sight."

PENDERGAST stood silent for a moment, then shot Kreg a glance. Kreg shrugged indecisively. The bearded man took a step nearer the cabinet. "I'll give you thirty seconds by my estimate. If you haven't agreed to our demands by then, I'll put a bullet through you and dicker with the other Brains. We'll kill you all, one at a time, if we have to!"

The noise from the Rotunda was less now. Pendergast's men must be in control there. Seconds dragged by. Kreg could see Pendergast's lips moving in the count. Finally the bearded man snapped, "Five seconds!" Kreg's insides kneaded. Would the exile leader shoot? Would he himself—having made the promise? It would be murder—murder!

The gun went off deafeningly. The front of the cabinet distorted violently and showed a jagged hole. A little viscous liquid oozed out. Pendergast whirled savagely to Kreg. "Which one shall we take next?"

Kreg felt sick. His voice was hoarse. "Let's talk to Uncle Ben! He may be more reasonable!" He turned blindly to the door and stumbled along the corridor.

The exile aiming a gun at Ben Tomsun's cabinet jerked it around toward them as they entered, then quickly recovered. Uncle Ben's voice said sadly, "So you've killed Captain Gerlik."

Pendergast said woodenly, "Right. We don't care who's next!"

Uncle Ben sighed. "Violence! Violence! Don't you realize you carry self-destruction in your genes? You demand weapons. How long do you think it will be before you turn them on each other?"

Pendergast laughed shortly. "That's no problem of yours. Give us the guns, if you think we'll kill each other. That'll put you back in control!"

The voice said, "Why? Why is all this necessary? Why can't you live out your lives peacefully? We could have destroyed you instead of exiling you. Are you trying to prove that we should have?"

The lean, bearded exile said, "That's a matter of viewpoint. We intend to live our lives as well as we can and provide better ones for our descendants. You've talked enough. I'll give you the same thirty seconds I gave Gerlik."

Uncle Ben said hastily, "We'll yield. The colony comes first with us—you know that. We must survive to guide it. How many of

you are there inside Nose Cone?"

"That's classified information."

BEN said in a hurt tone, "I'm only wondering about the logistics. Some of you will have to carry weapons from the arsenal. You may take your pick—we'll assign 'pairbots to help you, if you wish. Can you all get away in six gravcars? We want to avoid any more killing. First of all we'd better clear the plaza." Intercom loudspeakers suddenly came to life in Uncle Ben's voice, "All citizens and lawkeeps—move away from Nose Cone. Several armed men in citizen's clothes will be coming out. No one is to interfere with them in any way. They may take what gravcars they choose. This is important! Everyone must obey." To the three exiles in his compartment, Ben said in a weary voice, "It will be best if you stay here for a few minutes, until the plaza is cleared. Then I'll talk to the people in the Rotunda."

Pendergast turned a taut face to Kreg, who said nothing. He felt as if he'd swallowed lead. Could things possibly go so smoothly?

The Rotunda sounded quiet, but from somewhere came faint shouts. Outside? Could he hear sounds from the plaza, with the access doors all shut? Probably—there were still the ventilator openings.

Or were there? He realized he couldn't hear the familiar hum of fans. Nose Cone was quieter than he'd ever heard it. Maybe that was what made him feel drowsy.

Then, in the silence, he became aware of a faint hiss. "Gas!" he yelled, breaking toward the door. Already his muscles were slow. He stumbled, caught his balance, shoved the door open. Behind him, the alien pistol went off. Ears ringing, he ran up the corridor, shouting, "Gas! Gas!" More pistol shots made the bulkheads rattle. Exiles staggered from the Brain compartments. He could hear them gasping. He struggled toward the nearest up-ramp, forced his wobbly legs to climb it and pushed the door. A companion lurched into him from behind. He stared at unconscious citizens on the Rotunda floor.

Then he heard the rumble of access doors sliding open. "This way—" he blurted.

VIII

THE outside air gradually cleared his mind. He lurched across the plaza, seeing citizens run away from him. He paused to gulp deep breaths, then ran down a street, crossed an intersection, and leaned for a moment against the corner of the gravcar hangar. Pendergast staggered to him. "Are —are there likely to be weapons here?"

The anesthetic was washing out of Kreg. He took two steps and peered into the hangar. "I think so.

In that four-place lawkeep car. And that one."

Other exiles were joining them now. Kreg hurried into the hangar, darted looks around and saw nobody. He hauled himself into one of the cars and felt beside the seats for weapons. He found standard bullet-rifles and hyprodermic guns. He swiftly looked in compartments for extra ammunition and found it, then turned on the power. Men were piling in behind him. Pendergast ran to the second car he'd been shown. It filled, too. The overflow had to seek out two-place cars ready to fly. Kreg moved his car forward into the open, then lifted it a hundred feet and shot across the fence. He stopped so the others could pull level. Pendergast called out, "I want to send someone after medicines. Is the public infirmary where it always was?"

Kreg nodded. "Eight blocks north of Nose Cone!"

Pendergast said, "Do you want to take care of that? I'll go try to pick up Nujent!"

Kreg nodded and swung the car around. He shot north above the crowded streets. He could hear people shouting questions at him —obviously they didn't recognize exiles. He dove for the roof of the infirmary, grabbed a hyp-pistol from beside the car's seat, and climbed out.

"I'll be quick."

He ran to the entrance and down the ramp. The infirmary was almost deserted—everybody seemed to have run into the streets. He pushed past bewildered personnel, found the stockroom untended and scooped up packets of antibiotics. No time for specialized medicines now. One arm laden, he hurried back to the ramp, got up it without being questioned and dashed for the grav car. He tossed in the packets and jumped in after them.

As he zoomed toward South Fence again he realized that the people were shouting more raggedly and that they weren't staring at him, but at something else in the sky. He jerked a look upward—and abruptly went rigid in the seat. The car shot on unattended.

THE sun was near enough dawn so that Main Hull was illuminated. But it no longer hung west of the colony—it was nearly overhead. And it looked bigger—so big he could clearly see its oblong shape.

One of the men in the rear seats choked: "It's coming down—"

Kreg's thoughts churned. He grabbed for the controls and sent the car shooting eastward toward the Sunrise Hills. The last thing he wanted to do—if Main Hull had somehow come to life—was lead it toward the tribe. He craned his neck to watch the bright growing object.

He saw Main Hull enter shadow. Shortly thereafter a succession of tiny lights appeared and scattered in various directions. They looked like the running-lights of gravcars, high up. Several seemed to be matching his course. He let the car shoot onward for a while, until it became obvious that three or four of the lights were pursuing him, then he swerved. They swerved with him, staying almost directly above, meanwhile dropping rapidly closer.

He was among the lower hills now. He saw a blast of light overhead, then a moving streak. A missle! It flashed down ahead of him, hit a slope, and exploded blindingly. There was only a little noise.

That was a signal rocket, then. And no doubt it was intended as a warning shot. He swerved again, made sure the car was at full speed and watched with growing despair as the pursuers closed in easily. He thought for a moment of making a stubborn suicidal fight.

But curiosity, as much as anything else, made him reach slowly for the controls and slow down. His passengers were glumly silent.

And then a greatly amplified voice came from one of the gravcars now circling him. "Don't waste time running, Tomsun. We can blast you to atoms. Surrender and you'll get a fair hearing."

Dumbfounded, he slumped in the seat. The voice was Captain Gerlik's!

Slowly a thought wormed into his mind. If Captain Gerlik hadn't been destroyed—if the bullet hadn't plowed through the Brain after all—maybe Uncle Ben and the others were alive too!

THE whole raiding party, including Nujent's small contingent, were locked in what had been Landington's second-largest auditorium. They were given food and water and a portable stove so they could feed themselves. What windows they could reach were blacked out with heavy steel plates that could not be moved, so that they couldn't see what was going on outside. Something was. They could hear citizens passing, sometimes in quiet-talking groups, sometimes running and shouting. And heavy work of some kind was going on. Maybe repairs were being made to Nose Cone, or to Main Hull. And there were sounds as if considerable cargoes were being unloaded and hauled away by gravtrucks.

Pendergast first spoke the thought that may have been in the minds of all the prisoners. "I'll bet you these clothes I'm wearing that they're going to put us in Main Hull and send it back into orbit. Maybe they'll rig TV cameras so people can watch us starve or go mad. I'll tell you this—if they do, I'll find some way to sabotage the damned thing. I won't have my

bones hanging up there as an object lesson!"

One of the others muttered, "Your plans haven't worked very well so far."

Pendergast grinned. "At least we made an impression. We brought Main Hull down—that'll earn us a place in history!"

Someone said, "The damned thing was supposed to be empty and inert."

Pendergast shrugged. "Obviously it wasn't. There were motors in working order, and fissionables to power them. And the Brains were in contact with it— they were able to bring it down, or at least Gerlik was. If I'd only made sure—"

Kreg said dully. "I *know* the Brains were behind those sensors in the cabinets. The bullet couldn't possibly have missed."

Talk dwindled. Some of the men improvised gambling games. Some slept, or pretended to. In any case, days and nights passed.

ON THE evening of the fourth day there was a strange rumbling that shook the building. Pendergast suggested.

"Testing out the drive."

No one argued.

That night dragged by. Then, as daylight filtered through the few cracks around windows, noises came from the main entrance.

Pendergast and some of the others were suddenly in a crouch, chairs or other objects in their hands for weapons. But Gerlik's amplified voice came through the heavy doors: "You may come out whenever you wish."

Nobody moved for a minute, then there was a rush. Kreg supposed the others were wondering, as he was, what kind of weapons would be trained on them. Someone threw open the doors and he blinked in sunlight.

He was perhaps the fourth one out. He stood silent with the others, staring up.

Already a mile or so above the city, Main Hull was rising slowly —with Nose Cone in place atop it! Kreg's eyes darted to where Nose Cone had stood and found the gaping hole. An odd fright lanced through him. South Fence was there and so were the familiar buildings. The absence of Nose Cone was as dismaying as if he'd awakened some morning and found both his hands missing.

He stared upward again and saw a single gravcar, tiny with distance, approach the Ship and vanish into it.

Long after the reassembled Ship was invisible, he stared up. Then, neck cramped and aching, he lowered his head. He supposed he looked as lost as the men around him.

THEY found seven people—five men, one boy, and one woman—hiding about the abandoned city. Possibly, Kreg supposed, a

few others would be scattered about the farms.

A few gravcars were left. Except for what little was in the cars' converters, there were no fissionables and no other sources of power. Food supplies were mostly gone, and so was most of the metal and other things. But what was left, though a puny treasure by the colony's standards, was vastly more than Pendergast could have dreamed of capturing.

Two days later, when more of the tribe had been flown in, someone found the voice reel with its recorded message. They brought it to Kreg because it spoke his name, and because the voice was Ben Tomsun's.

"Kreg Tomsun," it said, "by now you know that New Eden belongs to you exiles.

"The Brains, and various other things, were frauds. The intelligences known as Captain Gerlik and the others, including me, were programed in the computers of Main Hull. They were human minds once, but now they're collections of tiny wires and crystals.

" A colony ship, being on its own once it leaves Sol, must be ready for whatever it finds. Had we landed first on a fertile planet, the plan would have been different. As it was, we bred tough colonists by exiling hardy, combative people into the harsh environment.

"Your erstwhile neighbors of the colony aren't entirely happy about being suddenly evacuated like this, but they'll grow content with shipboard life as their ancestors did. Some day, with luck, they'll be landed on a lusher planet. If not, we'll have to repeat the process of selection. If we—the Brains and the Ship—wear out before we find a soft planet, at least we'll have left a few vigorous human colonies.

"We leave you to each other, which implies a certain amount of future conflict. But frankly—especially in view of the alien artifact's you recently dug up—I envy you.

"Please believe that there are sound reasons why we had to act as we did. We have vanity enough left so we don't want you to think ill of us. "Goodbye, and good luck."

There were no other messages.

Several days later a thought struck Kreg. He sought out Pendergast.

"I'll bet you these clothes," he told the bearded man, "that if we dig into that culvert system we crawled through, we'll find sensors of some kind that told the Brains exactly when we came in and where. I'll bet you, furthermore, that if we look around we'll find a dozen other ways through the fence, all set up for us. The Brains wanted it that way. We would have had to be very stupid to have failed."

Pendergast grinned at him and declined the bet. ●

(Continued from page 2)

were strangers. Most writers have a great deal of difficulty resurrecting the people who lived originally until "The End" came off the typewriter and then effectively died, leaving only memories.

Whatever the reasons, most sequels are vaguely disappointing. I've seldom tried writing one except in the teen-age category—and then only once and reluctantly. When I had to do a third in the series, I knew I would do better using a different character and shifting the background ahead in time.

Yet when a writer is able to bring off a sequel to a novel and make it stronger and better than the original, the result is a happy event. When all the material we have enjoyed once is made fresh again and is made to grow and become enriched before us, the old book is also made better for us. In that case our pleasure is not merely doubled, but effectively squared.

Dragonquest, by Anne McCaffrey (Ballantine, 95¢), is a sequel that is in all ways far better than the original. That is saying a great deal, since her *Dragonflight* won both the Nebula and Hugo awards. The new book also has a cover (by the same artist) that is much better than the one on the earlier book and that actually illustrates a scene in the novel. Most unusual.

As most science-fiction readers must know by now the original novel dealt with the Dragonriders of a planet called Pern. They were the descendants of Earth colonists who had forgotten their origin and developed their own feudal society. Their world was a good one, except that about every two hundred years it was menaced by a fall of ravening and deadly "threads"—spores of virulent life—that were cast across space from another planet, known as the Red Star. To overcome this danger they had bred a native life-form into huge dragons—creatures that could fly with a rider and could literally breathe out fire that consumed the threads in the air before they could take root. The dragons were telepathic and could be controlled by the rare humans who could commune with them; they were also capable of teleporting instantly from one place to another.

The story was of the training of Lessa to handle her queen dragon, Ramoth, in preparation for the next threadfall. When disaster struck, however, the people realized that the one Weyr—dragonhold—left on Pern was totally inadequate for the job. And Lessa forced her dragon back through time, rather than space, to bring other Weyrs from the past to help —gaining F'lar as her mate.

Fine. The story had richness and color. The science was not too believable, since such huge beasts would need a few miracles of musculature and airloading to fly and since almost everything depended on extraordinary psi powers. But as science-fantasy, it was handled well, though the solution to all the problems always struck me as being a mite too pat. Lessa goes back and asks the ancient weyrleaders to follow her through time and they do—just about like that. All we really got to know of them was their amazing amiability.

Anne McCaffrey cannot be accused of not letting us know more about them in the current novel. She has taken a deep and thoughtful look at them and at her whole world and world history as well as at the probable results of this simple solution to the problems of Pern.

Her use of what is left us from the first book is a fine example of how to rethink a story. We start with a group of leaders who are completely familiar with fighting threads and whose ideas—while proven by experience—are centuries out of date. They are not going to swallow the leadership of the relatively inexperienced F'lar and Lessa for very long—not when they find that the youngsters are filled with all kinds of silly notions that could lead to the end of the supremacy of dragonriders in general! We also have a bunch of predictions by F'lar that were too simple and easy in the original—and are now being proved dangerously wrong. And suddenly the history of Pern and its heritage—apparently almost neglected for millennia—becomes important and complicated. We begin with a basis for a fine conflict—but a great deal more is added to heighten it.

Before, we had a world of peasants (and a few petty lords) arrayed against the dragonriders. This time we have the texture of a full society. The characters are presented in the context of their varying occupations right through the entertainer-harpists who hold past and future in their hands and what the danger means to each becomes real. Anne McCaffrey's world comes to life. Incidentally, so does the Red Star and its true menace.

The life of the dragonriders is explored in depth. We finally begin to know what it means to be linked to a great brute, to sense the character of the dragons (as well as what they came from) and to realize by being shown—not merely told—what it must be like to have the intimate bond between dragon and rider ripped away by the sudden death of one.

Very little is easily obvious in this novel but all seems obvious when the story ends—the mark of a first-rate author. The book is not as simple as its predecessor but it

remains alive and easy to read. A list of characters and their places in the scheme is included; it isn't necessary but it is a convenience. A map of the planet is also shown, but is not adequate. Not all locales important in the book are marked on it and the whole Southern Continent is not only missing but isn't even indicated by distance or direction. You'll have to remember that Southern Weyr is not connected and is to the south, off the map. It won't matter if you don't try to find it there, however. The map is the poorest feature of this book—fortunately it is unnecessary.

Summed up, this is at least twice as good a novel as the one that won all the prizes. Given the basic elements of the dragons and their powers, it is consistent, logical and excellent science fiction. Here is a world, a people and a history. There is no too-simple solution this time, but the careful result of what is well prepared.

At the end McCaffrey leaves room for another novel to follow, since the Red Star remains a challenge, as does the true future of the dragonriders. There is no need for another, however—the book is complete.

Dragonquest is the best science-fiction novel I've seen in the first half of 1971. Don't miss it.

ANOTHER sequel that is better by far than its predecessor is borderline science fiction. The story might be considered sword-and-sorcery fantasy, but it touches enough on certain intriguing speculative realities to make it acceptable to many sf readers who do not normally look at most fantasy.

The Black Mountains, by Fred Saberhagen (Ace, 60¢), is a sequel to *The Broken Lands*—and while the first book left me satisfied but not greatly impressed, the new one strikes me as a first-rate job. At his best Saberhagen can write with a satisfying richness and power I had not expected even after reading his excellent "Berserker" stories.

Overtly this is another story of a world long after the collapse—technology has been lost and either magic or a strange sorcery based on shreds of science has taken over. The first book was the story of a band of men rebelling against the dictatorship of the lords who ruled the Black Mountains.

This novel takes over after the first success, when the victors suddenly realize the size of the job they have taken on and realize that they cannot simply remain free, but must actually storm the seemingly impregnable bastions of power—power they only partly know and against which they have virtually no weapons.

From the outset the book breaks away from the obvious. The reader no longer follows the viewpoint of a boy, but that of one of the con-

quered, beaten and maimed leaders of the evil power clique.

I won't try to sum up the plot. Some of the elements are familiar enough, but Saberhagen's writing and development of the details remove them from the obvious. And parts of the story are pure joy. There is the control of a djinn (well, call him that, though he's part Yankee mechanic and part Vulcan) who will do exactly what he's told about building aircraft for a wizard who has only a 19th-century picture of aircraft to guide him. There is a magic healing lake and the Lord Draffut, who presides over it; call him a god if you like—or try to see what Saberhagen has done with one of man's oldest servants who has evolved in mind and body. And there is throughout a marvelous analysis of the workings of magic and the true nature of demons.

The magic and the demons are real enough—not just trickery to turn normal scientific gimmicks against a superstitious people. Bits and hints throughout show that Saberhagen is really writing science fiction—though he conceals his science most of the time. In the end I have to conclude that both the odd handling of a returning technology from tatters of the past and the curious logic lying behind the demonology make the book at least first-rate science fantasy.

I suspect there will be yet another in the series, since Saberhagen has only begun to expose his rationale. Still, he has written a good novel by itself and there is a zest and a feel to the writing that made it irresistible to me. There are few writers who can do justice to a really rich set of characters and backgrounds, and Saberhagen has already proved he is one of the best.

Unless you can't abide even a touch of magic, don't miss this novel. Start with the first—if you still can fine it—but read the sequel in any event. It will stand well by itself.

The Tactics of Mistake, by Gordon R. Dickson (Doubleday, $4.95), isn't exactly a sequel. For want of a better word, let's call it a prequel, because it takes place before the novel it follows in date of publication. It uses the background of history of Dickson's "Dorsai" stories—such as *The Genetic General*. But *Tactics* begins at an early period and traces the founding of the world of Dorsai, from which later empires were to hire the marvelous mercenary troops that supported the turmoil of interstellar civilization for centuries.

I don't think the book is better than *The Genetic General*. Both works detail development of a man who can reshape history and the effect of the effort on the man himself. Cletus Grahame and the later Donal Grahame are involved

in equally stirring events and both are obsessed by a vision of the breakup of their form of civilization and the only possible cure.

Yet I cannot help feeling that Cletus makes a better hero than his later descendant. Donal had a miracle up his sleeve—he could levitate, though he didn't bother with such tricks. Cletus has no such ability. He is limited to what a human being can do at the height of his powers. He has only a vision of what must be and a skill at using the mistakes of others to force victory from them. He is also willing to pay the ultimate price for his vision, if need be. To me, this makes his struggles and triumph greater. Also, his inevitable girl friend-enemy is a lot more believable than the rather overbred and finicky heroine Donal drew.

In this prequel, since characters and background are not exactly those of the Dorsai series, Dickson has no problem bringing new thought and freshness to the story line. The plot is related to the future of the Dorsai stories depicted in the series but it can stand alone. And reading provides new insights.

Tactics is a thoroughly good adventure story with some depth. There is no simple conflict with a single menace—the action takes place against a complex of elements—good, evil, wisdom and stupidity—as should be true of any good novel. The lead character is a super-hero who is somehow so intensely human that the reader can readily accept him.

To see what can happen to even one of our best writers down the sequel trail, read Poul Anderson's *Operation Chaos* (Doubleday, $4.95). The novel is the result of putting together four novelettes written over some thirteen years.

The first part of the book is lovely indeed. The stories deal with an alternate world where science discovered the laws of magic and put it to work in a war even greater than World War II. The magic here is reminiscent of old issues of *Unknown*, for which these stories would have been written, had the magazine still existed. There is a lovely, wacky logic behind the whole business of using the laws of physics and chemistry generally to support lycanthropy and practical witchcraft in defeating the machinations of the enemy.

The three initial novelettes were excellent in magazine form and are still good in the book. The third doesn't quite measure up—its potential has already been drained by the preceding material. After an afreet and a wild salamander, an incubus is not much more menacing. Anderson seems to recognize this and dredges the devil out of hell in an effort to portray a major menace. And so, in more than one way, the novel itself goes to hell. And something that

began as brightly amusing suddenly has turned to darkness and horror.

Besides, we have reached beyond the limits where we can suspend disbelief. If we accept anything like a classical devil and hell we're not going to be able to swallow the fact that our witch and werewolf can suddenly develop powers to equal the ones that brought war among the Shining Ones and shook the very throne of Heaven.

A writer can as easily extend into absurdity as to reduce to it—perhaps more easily. And that is the final risk of sequelization. Except in very carefully planned series, there are limits to what can be made of the initial situation and anything more becomes absurd.

It takes hard thought, excellent craftsmanship—and restraint—to turn out a sequel better than a good original novel. But the few successes still make science fiction a great field to be in. ●

ORNITHANTHROPUS *(Continued from page 138)*

The blow never came.

They were past the cliff.

SCHADOW saw the draftfall as a glimmering mass of air that spilled over the lip of the cliff and tumbled toward the broken land. He had often seen such sights from afar but this was the first time he had been in one. Like every winged creature on every world, he normally knew better than to fly into the currents on the lee side of a mountain.

The downdraft caught him and Garp in its grip and threw them violently at the rocks. Garp howled, dropping his sword, which spun into a fang below him. Each member of the pack played frantically with his antigrav. But the air tossed them about like wood chips in a raging river. The downfall was too powerful to be beaten by the puny devices of man.

Schadow made no attempt to outfly the draft. Putting his arms next to his body in a swept-back position, straightening his legs, hitching forward at the waist and angling his aching wings close to his sides, he formed his body into an elementary airfoil, skidding through the air at an angle.

He closed his lower lids against the vicious winds and through them saw the fangs, the whole scene faded by the protective tissue so that it seemed that it happened in the depths of a faintly pink sea.

Ven's corpse was first to hit, smashing spread-eagled atop an altar of rock not two meters from the base of the cliff. Two others hit farther out. Silently, explosively

they touched the ground, their screams and the crashes coming weakly through the winds after the fact. A fourth hit a shallow pool, sending up a shower of scummed water and insects. A fifth had slowed himself a bit with his antigrav and it seemed to Schadow that his screams must have continued for a second after he had hit.

Garp was a fast learner. On seeing Schadow he had copied the airfoil design, getting added spoiling from his antigrav. But he was too late and too low. The false Buddha smashed into a jagged outcropping of volcanic glass, beheading himself.

The pink-tinted ground was getting dangerously close. Schadow felt the skeletal claws of oblivion drag along his spine.

Then he was out of the draftfall and in a turbulent but strong wave lift beyond. Extending his wings, he soared into the sky and opened his lids to its eternal blue.

He looked down. Scattered on the ground were the twisted and broken forms of the fangs. Somehow an antigrav unit had been torn loose from a corpse and, free of its weight, clattered along under the force of the draftfall until clear and then shot through the air toward the base, perhaps on a homing signal. Three of the corpses, he noticed, were also beginning to move across the rocks, being pulled by devices that had outlasted their owners.

The skyhunter still floated where he had left it.

Did he dare to hope?

Though he was unarmed, he settled into a straightaway glide toward the beast.

It was obviously as near exhaustion as he but appeared unhurt. There was no reason for it to stay away from its sea hunting—unless it was waiting for him. It could be purposely baiting him, he told himself. Vengeance was not solely a human passion.

He slowed and circled before its massive head.

The amber eyes watched him.

Slowly, carefully the tentacle moved toward him. He stayed in his tight orbit, not moving away. The auxuliary eye at the tip of the tentacle opened—the tentacle itself touched his arm.

No poison cells opened to destroy him. The tentacle remained soft and gentle.

Laughing, Schadow grabbed the tentacle and the skybeast, tender as he remembered another of its kind, grabbed him.

It placed Schadow atop its bladder, where he could sit and rest. He didn't mind the fact that the skin was almost unbearably hot from the sun. He laughed again. The beast moved its tentacle joyfully and the dragon-amphibians that guarded the seacliffs screamed at them as they moved through the sky and over the sea, once-enemies, now-brothers. •

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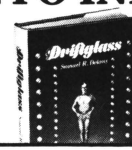

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