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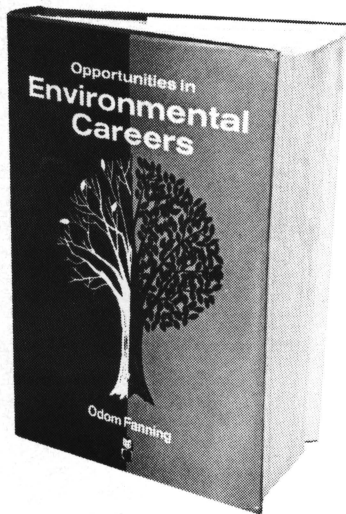
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WORLDS OF



SCIENCE FICTION

January-February 1972
Vol. 21, No. 3
Issue 158

**ALL NEW
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**HUE
and
CRY**



Readers write—and wrong!

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I was happy to see Robert F. Young's Abyss of Tartarus in the Oct. '71 issue of If. For those of your readers who may not know this, the story is actually a continuation of Starscape with Frieze of Dreams from Orbit 8. Both stories are fine and I hope we hear more of Starfinder from Mr. Young.

I was also wondering if perhaps a new area of fandom is opened by Mr. Young's "telehieroglyphics." It seems to be just the sort of thing fans enjoy playing around with; I would appreciate hearing from other fans about this.

Finally let me compliment you on your excellent magazine. You may, of course, print my name and address.

*Tzvi Langermann
86 Greenough St.
Brookline, Mass. 02146*

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

As a reader of both Science Fiction and Fantasy for the last 40 years, I feel at least partly qualified to judge stories in both fields.

I have read all the hardcover books in three libraries plus practically every paperback since 1930. I am not a fan nor do I collect the magazines. The sole purpose of my purchase and reading of a book or magazine is for the enjoyment it gives me. I am not extremely critical of the author of a story or his writing style—he can miss a few points as he goes along or fail to tie his story together as he should. I do become irritated by the deliberate inclusion of a character in the plot who has no bearing on the story and is obviously there to fill out wordage.

There is one type of science fiction and fantasy I have tried to like but cannot. This is the so called "new wave" that seems to consist of a veritable flood of descriptive words containing all foam and no beer. Only twice in 40 years have I quit reading a story in sheer disgust and both times the writer was "new wave."

I wish to compliment you on your last issue of If, October 1971. A better cross-section of topnotch writers would be extremely hard to find in a bi-monthly magazine. I enjoyed each and every story although the story by Young required a knowledge of a previous story on the "What" to be completely comprehensible.

I would never presume to tell you how to edit a magazine. I am not a frustrated critic, writer or

editor and this letter is to let you know there is one of your readers who thinks you are doing an excellent job, and will continue to do so in the future.

One addition I do recommend is a subscription blank with every issue. You just might get more subscribers.

Dale Fortson
Abilene, Texas 79603

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

The dictionary defines "fine arts" as arts purely esthetic or expressive: painting, drawing, sculpture and architecture; sometimes including literature, music, drama, and the dance.

How about let's call or classify fiction, drama, art, poetry, and sculpture the "life arts," since they all simulate life. The life arts have a strong unifying basis for the classification, something in common: they all copy, simulate, or imitate life. In the case of fiction and poetry, it is accomplished indirectly through word symbols; in the case of drama, it is done either way, through words if read, or live on stage (directly); pictures and sculpture, of course, are also direct.

It is easy to see that architecture, music, and the dance do not simulate life, though the latter two may be expressive of it. The fine arts as a class is a very broad, diffuse classification, and they

(Please turn to page 175)

ASIMOV'S RETURN—A MAJOR PUBLISHING EVENT!

WE are proud to be able to announce forthcoming publication of Isaac Asimov's first new novel in 16 years, **THE GODS THEMSELVES**. It will appear in three fascinating installments scheduled as follows:

(1) *Galaxy*, March 1972—on sale January 25.

(2) *If*, April 1972—on sale February 25.

(3) *Galaxy*, May 1972—on sale March 23.

Why this unique arrangement? Well, we found **THE GODS THEMSELVES** so rewarding and exciting, so special in every way, that we were determined to bring it to our readers somehow. But since *Galaxy* and *If* are now bimonthly, to serialize this astounding novel in just one of them would have meant that we could not beat the deadline set for hardcover publication by Doubleday.

Fortunately, sections 1 and 3 of the novel are quite complete in themselves and closely fit the "hard science" coloration favored by *Galaxy*. On the other hand, section 2 of the novel—told from a different viewpoint—is perfect for the generally more fanciful mood of *If*. Hence, with Dr. Asimov's blessing, we decided to split his new work between the two magazines—thus making sure we get it to s-f readers by the required date and in the proper setting.

If your dealer does not handle one or the other, you can order single copies of either *Galaxy* or *If* directly from us. Similarly, if you subscribe to only one of the magazines, you can order single copies of the other directly from us. We pay postage.

In any event, don't miss this masterpiece of a novel by the great and gifted Isaac Asimov!

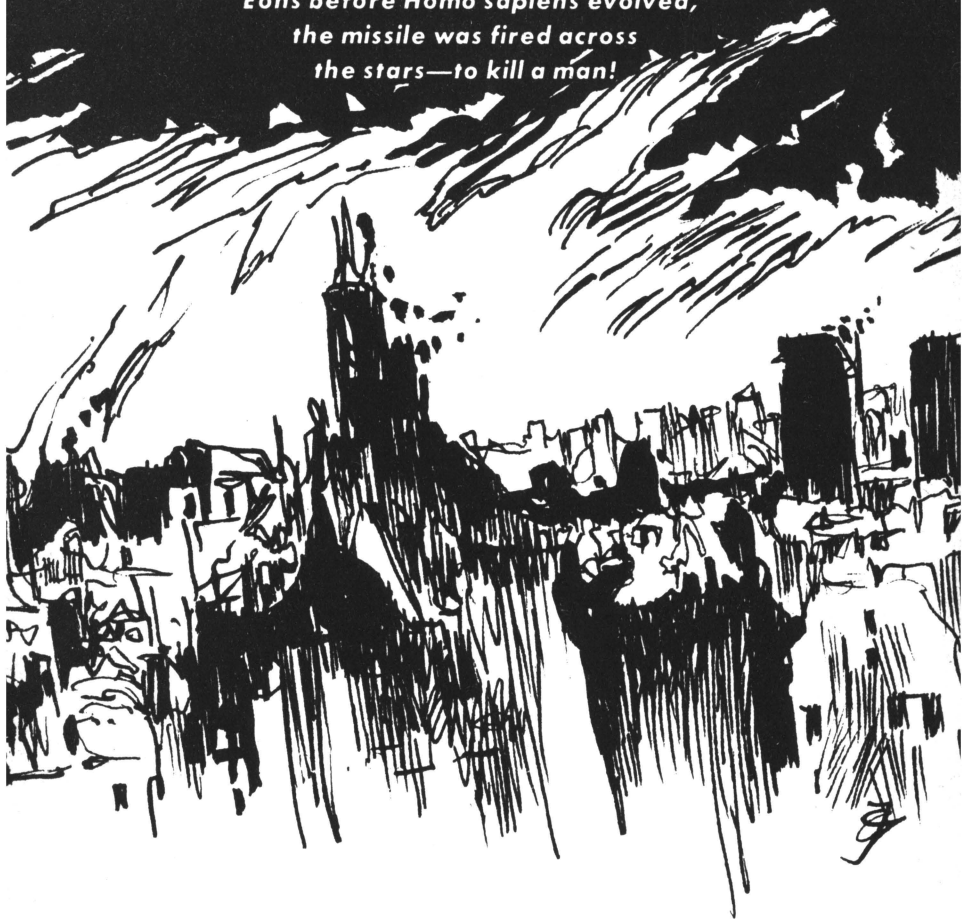


PART ONE

PATTERNS OF CHAOS

COLIN KAPP

*Eons before Homo sapiens evolved,
the missile was fired across
the stars—to kill a man!*



THE night was shattered by a hundred copper candles, presor beams bearing down, feathering the mighty bulk of a ship on to the center of the city, bruising the very bedrock with resonant thunder. Green and violet, the lace traces of Yagi beams stabbed sharp disruption into the fabric of the buildings, and the quick flick of lasers struck fires that completed the destruction. The city of Ashur on Onaris, razed by the blistering savagery from above, writhed in agony and prepared to surrender. Resistance was suicide—and even acquiescence held no guarantee of survival.

Perhaps it started as a whisper in some white wilderness—the sick spite of a broken body, cradled in cold, crying futility unto a futile wind:

**DON'T YOU KNOW THAT
GOD IS DYING?**

In the uncertain shadows against a broken wall the figure of a young man lay in fetal position, only partially aware of the devastation raging around him. Such consciousness as he bore was almost entirely consumed by a battle of equally desperate proportions deep within his skull.

Perhaps in the sordid cells of some inhuman inquisition a spirit snapped, the mind mazed not by the searing steel, the nibbling nerve—but by a vaster wound:

**DON'T YOU KNOW THAT
GOD IS DYING . . . DYING . . .**

The man moaned softly to himself and rose to a sitting position, cradling his face in his hands. A Yagi beam, green and malignant, sliced the end from a nearby building and the area was deluged with falling bricks. He sank back, unable to fight.

Perhaps some maimed martyr, crazed upon the cross, held up his head and cried unto the heavens:

**LORD, WHY HAST THOU
FORSAKEN ME?**

And was answered never. The ultimate betrayal. The immaculate blasphemy . . .

**HAS NOBODY EVEN
TOLD YOU?**

**THEY SAY THAT GOD
IS DEAD.**

The young man climbed to his feet and started slowly and still unseeing across the littered square. His uncertain path took him nearly into the beam of a probing Yagi, but fate and guesswork diverted his feet. He blundered finally into the wall of a building, recoiling with a bloody forehead to sink again into the timorous shadows of a ruined doorway.

Bron! Bron, for pity's sake, why don't you reply?

He made no answer. The blood from his forehead trickled down his face and ran salty into his mouth. Soon the shock and the pain forced him from his reverie and pressed on him a brutal ac-

ceptance of his environment. For the first time he showed an awareness of the holocaust. He looked out across the flickering waste of the tormented city, agony and comprehension filtering across his torn brow.

Bron, for God's sake answer.

THE sky flared suddenly green and hideous as the Yagi's beams found and detonated an unknown arsenal. The blast from the explosion damned the building as a sanctuary and only instinct flung him clear. The walls between which he had been sheltering broke apart and the door against which he had pressed his back seconds before was buried deep under a murderous pile of masonry.

Bron, are you receiving me at all?

"I hear you." In clear ground on the square he stopped and forced himself to speak, his voice ragged with undertones of near hysteria. "Where are you? I can hear you, but I can't see you."

Jupiter! The voice was aghast. No! You have to be joking! Six years and a quarter of the Com-mando budget were needed to place you where you are—and now you feign amnesia. Bron, you must be joking!

"I never felt less like joking. I feel sick. Who are you—if you're not imagination?"

Steady, Bron, steady. The big blast must have given you a con-

cussion. You're in a bad way by the sound of things. I had to use the semantic trigger to pull you out of that coma. Is there nothing you remember at all?

"Nothing. I don't know who I am—or who you are. You seem to be speaking in my head. Am I having hallucinations?"

Far from it. This all has a rational explanation. Only your memory is faulty.

"Where am I?"

In the city of Ashur on the planet Onaris. It's under attack by Destroyer ships.

"And you hear me. How do you hear me? Where are you?"

Jupiter! This gets worse. We don't have time for explanations now. First you have to get clear of the square and find a place to rest. I'll explain later if your memory doesn't come back. For the moment you'll have to take what I say on trust.

"And if I don't?"

Don't dare me, Bron. There's too much at stake. If you could remember what you were—and why you are there—you'd know better than to ask the question. Don't make me show you why.

Bron pressed his head into his hands for a full half minute, then straightened.

"Very well. I accept that for the moment. What do you want me to do?"

Move out of the city center. The damage won't be quite so bad on

the perimeter. On the other side of the square, as you now face it, is a thoroughfare. Follow that until I tell you where to turn. I'll stay with you.

Bron shrugged and followed the instruction, fully aware now of the blistering fury shrieking out of the sky. The ship above was obviously preparing for a landing, ploughing for itself a stabilizing furrow deep in the flesh of the city and savagely eliminating all resistance in the areas surrounding. The relative absence of population in the attack area suggested that the atrocity had not been unannounced. A rising scream to the east told of where yet another spatial dreadnought had decided to make planetfall. Something about the pattern stirred a thread of Bron's memory, but its pursuit eluded him.

CAUTIOUSLY he picked his way around the edge of the square, finding an unknown talent for making the maximum use of cover against the devastating Yagis. On the far side he found the thoroughfare, once one of the proudest streets of Ashur, now a hulk-lined valley of debris, rimmed with fire.

"You there in my head—are you listening?"

We're always listening.

"How do you listen?"

You've a bio-electronic transducer implanted in your brain. Our

equipment is such that we can hear you and speak to you no matter where you go.

Bron absorbed this in silence for a moment.

"Who are you?"

Associates in war. I'm Doctor Veeder. Does the name mean nothing still?

"Yes."

It will come to you. And Jaycee and Ananias. We three will be your unseen companions, as we have been in the past. We're all part of the same team.

"What team?"

Special Assignments group attached to the Stellar Commando.

"Ah—"

You recall something?

"I recollect vaguely that I was a Commando—but not here. Terra I remember, Delhi and Europa. I can't recall anything after I left Europa."

That's significant. It was when you left Europa that you started these special assignments. I don't wonder your psyche chose that point to start forgetting . . . Watch out!

Bron moved. The cautionary word and his own instinctive reactions coincided completely. A probing Yagi beam shattered the road surface inches before his feet. The backwash of the flux discharge caught him as he turned, flung him sideways, stunned but relatively unhurt. As the beam sliced on through a yet unbroken colonnade

he regained his feet, still shaking with reactive shock.

"You—"

What's the matter, Bron? Are you hurt?

"You saw that Yagi coming. How?" Bron was breathing hard.

Yes, I saw it. I've been trying to break this to you gently, since the relearning of the facts may be something of a traumatic shock in your present condition.

"Spool the riddles! Can you see me, also?"

Not see you—we see through your eyes and we listen through your ears. Day and night we watch and listen to every facet of your experience—Jaycee, Ananias, and myself. That's our job. We can also speak to you and you can't shut us out. Our voices are transmitted directly to your brain. We can do a few other things, too, but we'll go into those later. For now, just follow my instructions. We'll find you a place to rest.

"Very well."

Bron accepted the order with resignation. He was in no fit state mentally to compose an opposition to the voice within his head. Physically he was drained and shaken and desperately in need of rest. He withdrew into himself and followed the instructions mechanically, gradually wending his way into darker corners of the broken streets and away from the focal point of the attack. Finally the voice seemed to cease. Unable to

proceed farther of his own volition, he kicked a few bricks from under his feet, sank down to the dusty ground and slept.

“HOW'S Bron now?”

Of the trio, the speaker was the only one in civilian clothes—a simple jet-black sheath which detracted nothing from her femininity. Her strong features were framed by raven hair garnished with self-luminous star-spice spangles. Her full lips rivaled her deep eyes in expressing the contemptuous force of her character.

Her question was addressed to the Medic-commander who turned away from the ranked screens. Dr. Veeder, tall and graying, bore the air of a man who had seen all the worst of life and learned to come to terms with it. Even at the end of his shift at the screens his crisp commando uniform, like his brow, showed no hint of other than authorized creases.

"He's still out, Jaycee, but as far as I can judge it's a perfectly natural sleep." He glanced back at the monitors, examining the pulsing waveforms. "It should be safe to wake him in about an hour."

"Damn him. If he's loused up this project I'll give him such hell he'll wish his mother had been a compulsive virgin."

"Don't climb on his back too heavily when he first wakes. He took a considerable blasting last night. I don't think he'll appreciate

the subtlety of your advances—and anyway, this happens to be an exercise in cooperation, not coercion. Ride him the way you usually do and you could very easily put him on the defensive.”

“I’d make sure he didn’t survive it.”

“Agreed—but that’s not the point. He has to survive if we’re going to get the information we need.”

She accepted the point sullenly. Veeder left the screens and reached for his cloak.

“He’s all yours, Jaycee. I’m going to get some sleep. Call me if anything unusual happens.”

“Engaged.” Jaycee slipped into the padded control couch in front of the screens and reached back to draw the curtains partly shut to kill the reflections in the cubicle. Then she began to run a routine check of the controls to ensure that she was familiar with their standing state.

The third member of the trio prized himself loose from the seat of the computer console as Veeder departed. Throughout the preceding conversation he had remained silent, his eyes never once leaving Jaycee. Now he came to stand directly behind her, watching the manifold screens as she trimmed and adjusted their symbolic legends. The bright tabs of his uniform proclaimed him a full Command General and contrasted oddly with his apparent youth, his

flaxen hair and pallid complexion. His eyes were curiously bright and he moistened his small, pink lips continuously with a small, pink tongue.

“Doc’s right, you know, honey-bitch,” he said quietly. “No good lashing into Bron while he’s in that state. He won’t understand it and he may well go on the defensive. You know what a cuss Bron can be when he turns awkward.” He moved forward and leaned against the back of the control couch immediately behind her. His hands hovered only slightly above her shoulders.

“Jet off, Ananias,” she said tiredly. “When I want your ideas on how to handle Bron I’ll ask for them.”

“Sure, honey-bitch. Play it your way. I just thought that as you couldn’t have an emotional workout on Bron you might be looking elsewhere for relief.” His hands moved on subtly to her bare neck, lingering.

She froze.

“What you askin’ for, Ananias? A couple of broken wrists?”

“Honey-bitch—you would not dare try that on me.” His voice held an undercurrent of danger.

“In three seconds if you don’t take your hands away.”

“You’re teasing, honey-bitch.”

She moved like a cobra, but he anticipated her action and had the additional advantage of operating from a standing position. He

broke her hold and pinioned her hands against the couch.

"My God, you tried it, too," He sounded a trifle shaken. "You're a vicious devil, aren't you?"

"You should know, Ananias. You been around long enough."

"Too long, perhaps. That's how I know the time to proposition. You can't live through Bron for very long without breaking."

MOMENTARILY her head turned to the big screen on which, when he was awake, the scene viewed by Bron's eyes was presented. Currently it was blank. The regular rhythm of Bron's breathing and pulse came through a muted speaker against the muffled background rumble of warfare. Various monitors picked up the sounds, separated and analyzed them and presented scan traces of their findings. In electronic representation was displayed as much information about one living individual as it was possible to transmit over the precarious transgalactic bio-electronic transfer link.

A stronger tie, however, existed between Bron, the agent, and Jaycee, his operator. This was the rapport formed by the close coupling of two minds sharing a common experience however differently presented. When agent and operator were psychologically matched to form one complementary person-

ality, the coupling was tightened even further. Sometimes intolerably.

Jaycee faced up and tried to look at Ananias. "You know what that does to me, don't you—livin' through him?"

Ananias kept control of her hands warily. "Sure. That's how I know when you're ripe for an emotional climbdown. Some time you've got to give way—else you're going to crack."

"And you hang around hopin' to collect whatever it is I have to give?"

Her voice was edged like a razor.

"Sure, honey-bitch. I'm a connoisseur. What you have to give is something of an acquired taste. You've a streak of tigerine spite which has no business this side of hell and you have to work it off on somebody. Well—a man could get addicted to that sort of thing."

"And you think you're deservin' of special privileges?"

"I always give good service."

"Look, Ananias, I admit you once caught me off balance after Bron had wound me up. But that's only because you happened to be the first livin' thing down the corridor. It could have been anyone."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

Then: "You don't mean that, honey-bitch."

"Like hell I don't. When I get that high I don't care what I find

as long as it struggles. I don't respond to propositions. I'm not looking for a lover—I'm lookin' for somethin' to help me catch up on a spell of suspended livin'. What I find doesn't need any identity—better he doesn't have any. No matter what, there's only one person I grapple with in the darkness."

The impasse between them was broken by the urgent summons of telltales on an auxiliary board. Ananias left her and was at the board in an instant.

"Radio room, Jaycee. Report from the Antares transmitters. Come in, Antares. Ananias on line."

"Hullo, General! There've been new developments on Onaris. To prevent further bloodshed, Onaris radio has just broadcast their government's acceptance of the Destroyers' unconditional surrender terms. Effective opposition to the Destroyers has now ceased."

"Good. Did the Onarian government put out an appeal for outside help?"

"They started using their FTL transmitters as soon as the Destroyers entered the system. They couldn't expect to be heard except accidentally, of course, if there happened to be a starship within their range."

"Did you make radio contact with them?"

"No. Our instructions were to the contrary. They could have no

idea that our monitoring chain had picked them up."

"And nobody else answered their call?"

"No one we could detect. Certainly the FTL emergency bands were clear."

"Keep monitoring the emergency frequencies. If anyone shows sign of answering their appeal—jam them. It's imperative that nobody interferes before the Destroyers have taken what they want and pulled clear."

"Understood, General. We'll report again if the situation changes."

Ananias broke the connection and turned back to Jaycee.

"So far everything has gone as planned—except for Bron." He frowned at the still vacant master screen. "The Destroyers have attacked, Onaris has given way, the entire Commando fleet is on yellow alert—and the most expensively prepared Commando agent in history occupies a strategic position in the middle of a raped city, snoring his bloody head off."

"Not exactly your night, is it, Ananias?"

"Don't grieve for me, honey-bitch. You know I always win in the end. And if I have to wait a little, then the spoils of battle become all the more enjoyable."

"You're a Godlost weaklin', Ananias. Unprincipled, but a Godlost weaklin'."

She turned once more toward

the screens, this time purposefully studying the traces which told the details of Bron's existence. Ananias moved back behind the couch. He knew better than to attempt to interfere with her now, as she adjusted the microphone and herself and began to reestablish the rapport she had with a sleeping Commando agent half a galaxy away.

"Perhaps in the sordid cells of some inhuman inquisition . . ."

"Damn you for a bitch," said Ananias quietly:

II

HIS rest was broken by the insistence of a voice.

. . . the mind mazed not by the searin' steel, the nibblin' nerve—but by a vaster wound . . .

"Stop it—stop saying those things."

Get on your feet, Bron. Did you think you deserved a rest day?

Bron stirred in the ruins, cruelly aware of the cold in his bones. The first pink of daybreak washed against the shattered skyline. His head ached and the wound on his temple was stiff with caked blood. With difficulty he rose to his feet, shivering and trying to orient his thoughts.

"You in my mind—you're not the one who spoke to me last night."

*God—you should be so lucky as to forget me—*The voice trailed into spiteful incredulity. *No, Bron.*

This is Jaycee. Despite the restraints imposed by the electronic transfer the voice was clearly feminine. *Doc tells me you took a blastin'. How much do you remember?*

"Almost nothing. What's all this 'sick spite' and 'God is dying' routine?"

Hell, Doc was right. You are in a bad way. That phrasin' is the semantic recall trigger geared into your subconscious. In any condition of lowered consciousness, from sleep through to coma, if you hear that you'll have to respond. The wordin' is meshed with the hypno-character synthesis which was impressed on your mind.

"This gets insaner every minute. What's this hypno-character thing?"

An artificial character pattern impressed by ultra-deep hypnosis. It's the character you have to be to pass the Destroyers.

"But I don't even know my own character, let alone the synthesis."

The fact you respond to the trigger means the synthesis is firm. You'll react in the right way to a proper stimulus, even if you don't understand your own actions. In a way your memory lapse is fortunate. It'll lessen the conflict between the synthesis and the real you. God! It's going to be well worth hearin' you believin' yourself to be a saint, Bron.

The sarcasm in the voice bit deeply into his mind.

“Is that what I’m supposed to be, Jaycee—a saint?”

Rather a sort of electronic Trojan Horse. But get to your feet, we’ve work to do. The Destroyers have landed three ships around Ashur and their first move will be the imposition of Destroyer Law. That means a complete ban on all movements and absolute obedience to their orders. We have to get you to the place you should have reached last night.

Bron searched his mind for the things he should have known but had lost. “All this is way beyond me, Jaycee. I’d at least like to know the cause for which I’m being martyred.”

Ah, that’s better—a touch of the old Bron irony. I don’t have time to give you much now. Briefly, Cana’s Destroyer squadrons have increased the scope of their destruction to a point where they are threatening the Rim Dependencies themselves. We can’t police all that volume of space—and they’ve destroyed thirty-seven known planets in five years. Our only hope of stoppin’ them is to trace their baseworld and launch a massive attack on that. That’s your job, Bron. The trick is to get you aboard a Destroyer ship in space for long enough to enable us to discover where the baseworld is.

“And that’s quite a trick, I imagine.”

If only you remembered! It’s taken us six years to get this far.

First we had to build the giant transmitters in Antares to handle the communications transfer link between us and you over transgalactic distances. It took two years of intelligence work to decide on the best way to attack the problem—and nearly a year developing your cover. And lastly there was you—the kingpin of the whole operation.

“Tell me about me, Jaycee.”

Some other time, when I’m feeling really bitchy. Chaos, Bron, that’s your forte—the sort of chaos that reaches out and affects everyone and everythin’ it touches. It’s the one part of your own character we’ve left unattenuated by the synthesis. It may be the one trait which can bring this mission through.

Bron considered this in silence. Then: “What do I have to do first?”

We’ve got to fit you into the background so when the Destroyers find you, they won’t suspect you don’t belong. We had a comprehensive cover worked out, but you should have been in position last night.

“Why should the Destroyers want to find me?”

Because you’re substitutin’ for a man they came to Onaris to find. Look, I’ll have to fill in the details as we go. But listen to me, Bron—this is important—play the game exactly as we give it to you and rely on the synthesis for con-

tinuity. Don't try any fool stunts of your own—if you do you're certain to get killed. We've lost more than enough men already just placin' you where you are.

"Which way should I go?"

THE sky was gradually growing lighter with the muddy grays of dawn and the vaguest hints of color were substantiating the shadows.

Get out on the thoroughfare and get me a few place names. Once we can pinpoint your position I'll have the computer give us a route. Then find a mirror and let me look at you. You're goin' to need to be right in character if we're to get away with this.

Bron shrugged and surveyed the broken walls which had given him partial shelter for the night. Part of the building farther back was relatively undamaged and it was to this he turned. The building proved deserted and the haste of the panicky exodus was underscored by the pattern of disorder in the dim rooms and hallways. He finally found a mirror-covered door. He opened and adjusted it to make maximum use of the available light.

"So that's me—"

Don't you even remember what your face is like?

"I couldn't have called it to memory. Do I fit, Jaycee?"

Not good. You'll have to clean that cut on your forehead. We can't

risk sepsis this early in the game.

"I'll clean it somehow. Anything else?"

No—except that I can't get used to your looking like a damned angel. That's the psychosomatic effect of the personality synthesis.

"And what do you propose I do about it?" He was irritated by the malice in her voice.

Don't spoil it, Bron. It'll wear off all too soon. No psychosynthesis yet devised could obscure the real you for very long.

He found street names for Jaycee to work on. His wound he cleansed with water he found in a cistern and he brushed away as much of the caked mud and blood from his cloak as he could manage. Then he returned to the mirrored door to study the effect of his ablutions.

He could not remember donning his clothes, but they consisted of a simple cloak of coarse weave and equally spartan undergarments. About his neck hung a well-worn crucifix of gold on a fine gold chain. A Bible in one of the ample pockets of the cloak appeared to complete his worldly possessions.

As Jaycee had said, his face had acquired a pious intensity—it almost shone from the youthful lines. He studied his features carefully, remembering them vaguely, yet not quite sure how different they had been prior to the hypno-synthesis.

He was quietly proud of the strength and character he found in the jaw and brow, but something diabolical seemed to lurk behind the eyes—in depths that at once frightened and fascinated him.

When you've finished your Narcissistic orgy I've got the route for you.

Jaycee's voice came so unexpectedly that it made him jump. He had the feeling she had been watching him in the mirror through his own eyes for some time. The tightness of the surveillance irked him. Something deep inside him clawed for freedom, like a wild beast confined in too small a cage. His expression must have given away his unvoiced emotion, for she picked up the thought with uncanny accuracy.

Don't say it, Bron. You're going to have to live with me inside you for quite a while. It's a situation I've come to enjoy—bein' underneath your flesh.

"Bitch."

She laughed.

Yes, I'm that, Bron, and most of the other things you've called me in the past. But now you'd better start travelin'. I'll give you spot directions from whatever landmarks we can still identify.

Her instructions directed him toward a region where the receding night was being shredded by the mottled gray-green erosion of refraction-scattered sunlight. Here even Onaris's famous polychro-

matic dawn seemed smeared with daubs of blood.

The ruins were unnaturally still and apparently devoid of life. Instinctively he felt to release his sidearm. Instead his fingers touched only on the Bible in his pocket; the discovery brought a twist of taut amusement to his lips. He looked at his hands. The nails were satisfactorily long and the muscles and flesh were hard.

He said, "Jaycee, I know what I have to fight with, but what am I supposed to do with the book?"

For once she did not answer, though he felt she was listening. Her silence brought a harsh realization of the seriousness of his situation. On this mission the synthesis and the book were all the weapons he was going to get.

SMOKE from still-burning buildings drifted in broad fronts across his path and Bron trod cautiously, fearing that his sudden emergence from a veil of smoke could lead to his being shot by some observer moved too suddenly to action. Nevertheless he obeyed the instruction implicit in Jaycee's directions and kept strictly to the middle of the roadway, making no attempt at concealment.

"It's too damn quiet, Jaycee. Where are all the people?"

Total evacuation, Bron. The Destroyers have imposed an abso-

lute clearance of a five-kilometer radius around each landing site. Turn around in a full circle, will you. I want to take a check on your position.

Bron turned slowly on one heel, following the skyline with his eyes and dwelling on any features of the broken terrain that might be construed as landmarks.

“On course?”

Near enough. Just clear of the Destroyers' five-kilometer perimeter, but still in the evacuated zone. Your main danger is the Ashur police, who may come looking for looters. Stay in the open and keep your hands empty and in view.

“Shouldn't I be going toward the ship?”

You're jokin'! Cross that perimeter and you're a dead man. The only way anyone gets through there is if the Destroyers choose to take him.

“And you think they'll choose to take me?”

We're hopeful. You're to impersonate a key Onaris technocrat. You were due at the Ashur Seminary last night, but the Destroyers struck before we could get you there.

“What the hell would the Destroyers want with technocrats?”

They take anything that's any value to them—brains, slave-flesh, metals. And as many items of higher technology as they can find. That's why they put down an entire fleet. They strip a planet of

anything useful they can carry before they destroy it.

“That doesn't make sense, Jay-cee.”

No, but it's fact.

“Slave-flesh and metals I can understand, but not technocrats. They can surely train enough of their own.”

They appear to be concentrating on ones with a certain specialty—authorities on the patterns of chaos. Seems as though Onaris had one of the top men in that field.

“I thought Terra had all the top men.”

That's a classical myth. In fact, the reverse is true. When the starships started the Great Exodus from Terra they took an unusually high concentration of very high IQ emigrants with them. It's not rare on a settlement planet to find two or three families still breedin' an almost pure genius strain. Onaris had one family of decidedly genius strain—the Halterns. You're cast as Ander Haltern, direct ninth descendant of Prosper Haltern. Ander's probably one of the galaxy's top men on the patterns of chaos.

“What happened to the original Ander?”

On Terra, cooperating with us. We took him off secretly six months ago. The story's been patched to support your appearance in Ashur just now. By the way, by Onaris custom, one's familiar name is not on official

record, so you're still at liberty to call yourself Bron. I advise you to do so. That split-second's hesitation in respondin' to an unaccustomed name could be crucial in an emergency.

Bron suddenly stopped. "Voices, Jaycee."

Where?

"Beyond the smoke in front."

Yes, I hear them now. A police roadblock, I should imagine. Definitely native Onaris-Ashur accent.

"You can hear all that?"

When necessary we can apply a lot more gain to the signal from your ears than you can. You've got to go through there, Bron. Let the synthesis take over your responses. Don't try to override it. If you do you're likely to come out with a few pure Bron-type answers and reactions—and that could lead to a fairly rapid termination of the project.

AS HE cleared the smoke he could see what had once been a line of stone-clad buildings, now a mere complex wall, castellated by fire and blast. The road continued haphazardly through the ruins and a barrier had been set across the track. On this were posted men in the green uniforms of the Ashur civil police.

"Stay or we fire." The sudden voice was electronically reinforced.

Bron halted. He saw no possi-

bility of avoiding or withdrawing from the encounter. The sand exploded just before his feet, defining a safe distance for his movements. An officer threw a voice amplifier into the intervening space.

"Approach the apparatus and speak."

Bron moved cautiously towards the amplifier, his hands upstretched and his eyes on the unwavering stubs of the weapons centered on his body. He inwardly saluted the police technique of maintained distance. Even had he possessed his full Commando equipment he could not have hoped to get a gas slug or shock pellet through to the barrier without drawing fire.

"What are you doing in the evacuated zone?" The amplifier impressed the officer's tones with a sinister metallic burr.

"Trying to get out." Bron's natural resistance to authority produced a spontaneous reply that forestalled any answer the synthesis might have prompted. The amplifier carried his words back to echo quickly against the broken walls.

"I see." The amplifier was critical and unamused.

Fool! You askin' to get killed? Jaycee's anger burst in his head so clearly that he found it nearly impossible to believe that the amplifier would not pick it up and hurl her words across the inter-

vening space. *Play it his way, you stupid cretin!*

"You heard the evacuation order last night. You know we dare not offer any resistance to the Destroyers?"

Yes, prompted Jaycee.

"Yes," said Bron.

"Then you know our instructions are to shoot on sight anyone found in the zone. Have you any reason to offer why that instruction should not be carried out?" The men at the barrier sighted their weapons and prepared to fire.

Jaycee's voice was a flurry: *I've checked his rank, Bron. He's a senior enough animal to be able to exercise discretion—and soft as hell, else he wouldn't bother to talk. Ride the synthesis, damn you!*

"I am Ander Haltern, called Bron, late to adopt my residency at the Seminary of the Sacred Relic." With a shock Bron realized that it was his own voice speaking, but the words and the tone were derived straight from the post-hypnotic suggestion. Intrigued, he let his mind and tongue freewheel. "How else can I reach my destination, save through your barrier?"

"Haltern?" There was a moment of consternation among the police at the roadblock, and the amplifier was swiftly muted to mask a hasty conversation. The Haltern name obviously carried a great deal of weight.

The officer spoke again.

"Can you prove your identity?"

"Is that necessary for a Haltern in Ashur?" The synthesis tightened his tone into intolerant sharpness.

"You have a letter of introduction, perhaps?"

"No letter." A temporary anger welled up inside him and he made a mental note of the shortness of Ander's temper. "What does a Haltern want with paper?"

"Then any other means—"

"If you can't take my word, you must come and see for yourself. Here is all I have."

With a savage gesture Bron stripped the cloak from his shoulder and let it fall to the ground. His undergarments followed, and then, completely naked, he stalked back to the edge of the smoke and waited.

Well clear of the amplifier he spoke softly. "Hell, Jaycee, this is weird. It's unnerving not to know how you're going to act until you've done it."

But you see how the synthesis works, Bron. It responds with a complete takeover of your reactions when a direct stimulus such as a question or a situation demands it.

"If it includes an impromptu striptease every time I'm asked for my identity, this is one synthesis that has definitely no future."

Jaycee was highly amused. *There's no tellin' what you may*

do. Ander Haltern is a highly individual character. But what worries me is your rapid relaxation out of the synthetic character. It suggests the synthesis isn't set any too firmly. I'll have to put Doc on it when he comes on duty.

The officer, bearing only a sidearm, came forward and turned the clothes over with his foot. At last he found the Bible and picked it up. Then he held out his hand.

"My apologies, Bron Ander Haltern—but you see, we cannot be too careful. These are very critical times." His eyes wandered apprehensively in the direction of the Destroyer ship. His face was almost gray with worry.

Bron dismissed him curtly. "Can you arrange transport to the Seminary?"

"Of course, Bron Haltern. I will see to it immediately."

The officer returned to the barrier and Bron turned back to his clothes. He could hear Jaycee's outward amusement as he retrieved the garments and solemnly dressed.

It's just occurred to me. Jaycee was triumphant. Perhaps that's how you're supposed to use the book, Bron. You take off your clothes and sulk.

He said, "Damn you, Jaycee," contriving not to move his lips and in a mere breath of a voice which the amplifier could not pos-

sibly pick up. Jaycee responded with a peal of laughter.

"You heard that?" asked Bron quietly at the next opportunity.

If I hadn't—I'd have guessed. But you don't need to vocalize. We can pick up subvocal speech just as well. You should be able to communicate with us in full view of other persons without their being aware of it.

"You've got all the damn answers, haven't you?"

More than you're aware of, Bron. And on this assignment I've got you dancin' like a puppet, because you don't remember just how sharp some of those answers are.

III

THE scudder placed at his disposal was a typical heavy-duty vehicle, brutally functional and highly articulate. Under cover of the jet scream and out of direct sight of the driver, Bron practiced subvocal communication.

"Can you read me, Jaycee?" The action was no more than thinking the words and allowing the muscles of his throat to perform their customary actions but without the aspiration necessary to produce a sound.

Loud and clear, Bron.

"What was it about the book that convinced him I'm Haltern?"

I think because it's an old Ter-ran Authorized Version—very

rare on a dependency world. Only an intellectual like Haltern could be expected to understand it.

"Bit of a queer bird, this Haltern character."

But brilliant. He's a master syncretist—probably one of the best alive today.

"What's a syncretist?"

One who works across the channels of scientific specialization rather than along them. To qualify for mastership you need at least ten honors degrees in unrelated subjects and the proven ability to think freely across the lines of the various disciplines as well as with them.

The scudder banked swiftly and Bron, restraining an instant of vertigo from sudden awareness of the unexpected height they had attained, looked down at the vast edifice below them.

"What's that, Jaycee?"

Ashur Seminary. More correctly, the Seminary of the Sacred Relic of Ashur. That's where the Destroyers will expect to find you.

The scudder burned its way down through the clear air of the morning and drove to an unpolished finish before the great portals. Bron Ander Haltern alighted, obeyed the synthesis-keyed instinct which forbade him even to acknowledge the driver's presence and ascended the great steps of the Seminary. As he did so he felt the mantle of the synthetic character

closing around him, entrapping him in the shadowy web of somebody else's mores and reactions. Again the beast that was in him clawed out piteously for freedom.

Nobody awaited him. The vestibule led to a corridor and then to a farther door. Beyond this he found a vast and vaulted hall lit only by the sunlight entering through strangely stained and patterned windows. He stopped suddenly, entranced by the space and unity of the edifice. The great columns that rose to support the beautiful roof were clustered with carved figurines and statuettes depicting scenes which casually had no meaning for him. The walls were similarly complex and ornate, obviously endowed with the same rich symbolism.

The synthesis guided his feet across the floor and down the central aisle between stone blocks arranged as though for seats. At the far end, between white alcoves set into the wall, stood a bare dais. Behind it was a shield emblazoned with the sun-disk symbol of Ashur and centrally in the shield, nailed cruciform, hung the sacred relic—a replica of a small, brown, furry quadruped. Around the shield hypnotic stereo-color tablets spelled out the single word:

GLADLY

"Is this some kind of church, Jaycee?"

Some kind. But not the sort you find on Terra. Not quite that sort of religion either—though they do claim their God is the same.

Bron turned and studied more closely the figurines on the columns closest to him. He heard Jaycee's sharp intake of breath.

Move closer, Bron. This is interesting'.

"What is it? A monument to De Sade?"

No. An expression of faith. Mortification of the body for the edification of the soul. In the Seminary the cultivation of mind and spirit is all. The body is regarded merely as a vessel of atonement for the weaknesses of the other two.

"Jaycee, that's sick."

It's their way of life. The columns are supposed to depict the classical two hundred and fifty-six modes of penance for weakness.

"After some of those penances there wouldn't be anything left to be weak with."

Subvocalize, Bron. There's someone coming.

BRON scanned the hall swiftly, but no one was yet in sight. His gaze fell again on the sacred relic, whose button-bright and twisted stare suddenly typified the distorted philosophy portrayed by the figurines. The act triggered something in the hypnosynthe-

sis and against his conscious will he dropped to his knees, hands clasped before him, in an attitude of prayer and supplication.

The footsteps closed behind him.

"Ander Haltern?"

"The same." Bron rose and turned to face the questioner.

"What will be your familiar?"

"Bron."

The preceptor—the hypnosynthesis identified the other's function—was lean, gray, ascetic and unwelcoming. "We expected you yesterday, Bron Ander Haltern. How do you answer?"

"Ashur was destroyed by the raiding and I nearly with it."

"You allowed the trivia of the times to come before your duty?"

"Trivia? You damn—" Bron overrode the acquiescent synthesis.

Steady, Bron.

"Bron Haltern, having achieved mastership, you have the privilege of choosing your own penance for absence. What do you offer?"

"What do I answer, Jaycee? The synthesis gives me nothing." Subvocally he could form the words faster than he could have spoken.

Stall him. This wasn't programmed. I'm contactin' Ander.

"Ashur is nearly in ruins," said Bron aloud. "The Destroyers are in control. Outside these walls nobody has right of movement or even right of life. Do you still de-

mand panance from one detained by such events?"

"Bron Ander Haltern." The preceptor's face was grave. His eyes were tinged with a depth of irrationality. "You disappoint me. That is not the reaction one has learned to expect from a Haltern. Come, make your offer—or I shall impose one of my own."

The shirt, Bron.

"The shirt," said Bron.

The preceptor's eyes widened abruptly and his jaw dropped. "Forgive me! I meant no disrespect to the Halterns. There is no need—"

The synthesis swung Bron wrathfully. "Are you questioning my decision, Preceptor?"

"Of course not." The preceptor's eyes mirrored agony and embarrassment. "It's just that the act does not warrant such a level of penance. I must ask you again, are you sure you're prepared to accept the shirt?"

"Gladly." The word rose spontaneously from the synthesis.

The preceptor shrugged resignedly. "Very well. I shall conduct you to your cell. The shirt will be delivered to you there."

Bron followed the preceptor out of the hall by a minor door, then through a series of corridors, each similarly ugly and depressing with a severity of line which made no concession to the human need for contrast and relief. The occasional doors were dark, square and

massive, with small, high, shuttered windows.

"Jaycee, this is more like a prison than a seminary."

On Onaris there's little to choose between them. Education is inseparable from religion and religion from austerity and disciplined penance. The only thing about the system that stands in its favor is that it produces some remarkably good scholars. Twisted but brilliant.

"I can imagine. And what the hell's the shirt?"

Don't know. It was Ander's idea. He seemed to think it appropriate to the crime. He's getting quite a kick out of the idea.

The preceptor reached a door and halted. The proximity lock responded unhesitatingly to his fingers and the heavy wood swung open. Bron, though accustomed to a lifetime of utilitarian Commando accommodation, stood appalled. The cell he was invited to enter was a featureless stone box. The only attempt at furnishing was the provision of a solitary coffin-sized slab of cut white stone, which presumably had to serve as table, chair and bed. There was nothing else at all.

A solitary eye of unalterable light stared down harshly from the ceiling. The aperture through which it entered was encircled by the gilded message:

GLADLY

The preceptor was watching his face, but Bron managed to remain impassive.

"In a few minutes, Bron Haltern, I will send you the shirt. I suggest you don it immediately, then you will not be unduly late in conducting your first tutorial."

"Is the penance then not to wait until the evening service?"

"No. You have earned greater respect than that. I think your absolution will be more perfect if the work of the shirt is well advanced by the time you bear witness to the assembly."

Under the influence of the synthesis, Bron bowed his head and waited until the preceptor had departed.

"That man's not only a sadist, Jaycee, he's also quite mad. He took in absolutely nothing of what I told him about the destruction of Ashur. His world begins and ends in a small closed circle of Seminary rites. How long do I have to stay here?"

Not long, I guess. The Destroyers always know where to look for the people they want. They must put in some damn good intelligence work before they strike.

"Am I the only one they're looking for?"

We think so. They'll otherwise take mainly slave-flesh. They're obviously colonizin'. Human flesh is a lot cheaper and more versatile than machinery on an undeveloped world.

"Interesting point. The fleshships were not unknown even in the days of Terran space colonization."

Bron broke off as a knock on the door heralded the arrival of a student bearing the shirt. The student slipped the garment from its filmy wrap and left it on the slab. As he passed and bowed, his eyes bore a look compounded both of admiration and profound sympathy.

BRON examined the shirt cautiously. It clung to his fingers as though each fiber of its wool-like texture were possessed of microscopic barbs. With swift decision he stripped and donned the garment—and momentarily its hugging softness was almost luxurious. Its elasticity drew it smoothly over the contours of his body. A few seconds later he was genuinely praying, perhaps for the first time in his life.

In something akin to mortal panic he tried to tear the shirt away from his body, but the myriad barbs of the fine, white fibers were firmly engaged in his flesh. There was no way of removal save that of tearing away the skin. The burning itch and panic drove him to the verge of hysteria before he managed to clamp a cold composure on his reasoning.

"Jaycee, this is diabolical—"

Jaycee laughed. *It's apparently the modern equivalent of the pil-*

grim's hairshirt. Contemplation, concentration, and suffering' enrich the mind and ennoble the spirit. And let's face it, Bron, both your mind and your spirit were long overdue for somethin' drastic. I'm quite lookin' forward to the improvement.

"Damn you for a bitch, Jaycee. One day I'll make you regret that."

A knock sounded at the door. It was the student again.

"Mastership Haltern, sorry if I disturb your devotions. The preceptor requires me to conduct you to the Syncretics unit."

"It's no disturbance," said Bron. "I've already made my dedication clear."

Outside the door the youth put his knuckles to his forehead. "You may lean on my arm if you wish, Mastership." His eyes strayed to the shirt, the collar of which showed still above the cloak.

"Thank you, no." Bron declined as the synthesis demanded he must, but from the look in the youth's eyes he knew that the shirt was infamous.

As he walked, Bron could hear Jaycee cataloguing the way. His own consciousness was almost entirely absorbed by the unremitting and painful awareness of the shirt of penance and he was in no condition to master detail. At the door of the Syncretics unit the student saluted with knuckles to forehead as if in momentary

prayer, then departed. Bron touched the proximity lock. After a few seconds' trial the lock responded and he entered the laboratory to give his first-ever tutorial in syncretics.

This time he was impressed. The array of teaching and computing equipment must have cost a fortune. His audience of a hundred, all working in solitary cells, had instant on-line access to the computer as well as real-time monitoring of their own responses. The performance-analysis display panel was a masterpiece of ingenuity and enabled him to correct in seconds the failure of a student to grasp a single point or a single word.

Faced with a specific demand, the stored knowledge in the character synthesis produced all the information he needed. Yielding to the pressures of the synthesis, he allowed his hands to set up channels and controls, not properly understanding his actions until the instant they had to be performed. Then, as he followed the movement of his fingers, he began to understand the instruments before him. His lecture, too, came readily to mind and he spoke first and comprehended later.

Such concentration served to divert his attention from the shirt, but the irritant pain of such an intimate and widespread penetration of the skin was a distract-

tion that permitted him only two states of mind—extreme concentration and abject despair. Moreover his body was reacting violently to the attack with an allergic rash that spread soon to his face and hands and produced an unwholesome puffiness around his eyes.

“Jaycee, this shirt is killing me. Ask Ander how I get the damn thing off.”

I already did. Short of extensive surgery there seems no way of removin' it prematurely. The fibers are histamine sensitive. When the allergic reaction raises your body histamine to a sufficient level they will quit of their own accord.

“And for God's sake—how long will that take?”

Depends on the susceptibility of the individual. Could take up to thirty-six hours.

“I see,” said Bron grimly. “Have you asked friend Ander what proportion of its wearers die of shock?”

Yes. About ten percent, Bron. If we'd known earlier we'd never have let you put it on.”

“Whose side is Ander on?”

Ours apparently. He said the choice of the shirt was to keep you truly in the character of a Haltern. We overlooked the fact that most of the Haltern descendants are mad.

THE tutorial lasted five hours, after which Bron returned to

his cell. Agonizing though his hours in the tutorial had been, the work had at least partially taken his mind off the shirt. The leisure period offered no such distraction. The allergic reaction of his body was assuming alarming proportions. Muscles in his arms and legs were beginning to react with pain and stiffness which told of the spread of toxins throughout the bloodstream. Occasionally he thought he detected the first fringes of delirium in his brain.

For want of alternative, Bron lay painfully back on the stone slab and let the bright, unwinking eye of the solitary light glaze his deliberately unblinking eyes. By varying the range of his vision he could focus on the legend, GLADLY, or on the point-source of light or past both to infinity. As he neared the auto-hypnotic state he experienced slow alternations of light and darkness until finally he drifted into sleep.

. . . in the sordid cells of some inhuman inquisition a spirit snapped . . .

“Spool it, Jaycee! What's up?”

Knock on the door, Bron. Two men outside.

“Damn! I can't go on much longer, Jaycee. If this thing doesn't give up soon, I've had it.”

Doc's all but taking Ander apart tryin' to find out what the shirt's made of. The job isn't easy because native Onaris biology is obviously a field of its own.

Bron swung his feet painfully to the floor and attempted to stand. The stiffening ache in his joints at first defied his efforts, but gradually he persuaded his limbs to give him the necessary support. Like a sick man, he stood.

The two men were dressed differently from either himself or from the students. Their light-yellow tunics were obviously designed for ease of movement.

"Mastership Haltern, it is time for you to take the place of witness at the evening assembly."

The synthesis flashed sharp disapproval into Bron's mind. "Since when was it the custom to escort a penitent to his place?" The phrase was pure Haltern intolerance.

"The preceptor insists—as an assurance of spiritual discipline."

"Discipline comes from within not by imposition. The preceptor overreaches himself. I shall make my own way."

The wardens appeared momentarily uncertain of their position. Bron took advantage of the fact and steeled himself to walk ahead, shored up primarily by the synthesis-generated anger which fumed at the indignity of having a man's most private hour of fortitude supervised by wardens.

He entered the church and crossed to the center aisle, turning toward the sacred relic behind the dais. Some compulsion greater than his own will forced him to

kneel and look upward at the creature's twisted stare. His knuckles sought his forehead. After several minutes thus he attempted to stand, but his stiffened legs defied him and he twisted and fell. Immediately the wardens were upon him. They carried him to one of the alcoves flanking the dais. Here rings had been provided to hold a man's arms in such a position that even if he fainted, his body would still remain erect. To these he was fastened, facing down the body of the church.

IN THE hour before the assembly arrived his consciousness slipped several times into a delirious half-sleep that was more like a lapse in time than any human condition. When he awoke, the assembly of staff and students had mainly entered and taken their places on the blocks of stone. The preceptor entered last, clad now in ceremonial dress like some majestic cleric. He spared Bron and his misery only a fleeting glance. The service was long and tedious, full of responses and intricate psalms, and the sermons were dogmatic beyond reason.

Bron, striving to combat the gulfs of blackness that interrupted his thinking, tried to gauge from the expressions of the assembly the true feelings of the individuals toward his plight. The dominant look was of interest and participation. Only a very

few, like the preceptor, were twisted with the basic streak of sadism. For the rest it was part of the accepted norm.

Jaycee's voice broke in with sudden urgency. *Bron, this is what we've been waitin' for. We can hear the sound of heavy scudders movin' in. We can expect the Destroyers at any moment.*

As if to verify her words, a long explosion rumbled through the corridors and resonated in the cavity of the hall. The preceptor faltered only slightly in his prayer, then continued. A second explosion, more staccato this time, shattered the inner door.

An immediate panic was stilled as a group of armed soldiers rushed through the smoke-filled doorway. They deployed themselves professionally across the end of the church, waiting only for some act on the part of the assembly to cause them to open fire. The preceptor's words dribbled to a halt as he was faced with a reality he could not finally deny.

"Who are you? What do you want? Don't you know this is dedicated ground?" His voice echoed down the long hall, gathering timbre from the reverberations in the high, vaulted roof. It was unthinkable to him that his world should be violated.

The leading soldier spoke. "We 'ave Destroyer business 'ere. Where is one they call Ander 'altern?"

"He is here, making penance. I forbid him to speak."

"Quiet, old fool. It is I who give the orders." To emphasize the point a multiple gunblast ripped out three of the stained-glass windows. "Let 'altern come out or it will be men we split, not glass."

"I warn you—" The preceptor still had not grasped that his position was lost. "This behavior is sacrilegious. I demand that you leave."

A single shot through the head toppled the preceptor from the dais. His removal from the scene was so sudden that it was almost anticlimatic.

"Ander 'altern." Someone in the assembly at the back was being forced at weaponpoint to mark the quarry. The remaining raiders covered the assembly. Wisely, no resistance was offered. The Destroyer's firepower was, as ever, more than adequate for a massacre.

"Are you 'altern the syncretist?" The Destroyer leader stopped before Bron in the alcove, frowning at the manacles and the lymph-soaked shirt.

"The same."

"What they trying to do, kill you?"

The question was rhetorical but carried a refreshing draught of sanity. The Destroyer released the rings holding Bron's wrists and motioned him forward. Bron took one shocked step before his

knees buckled under him and he pitched headlong to the dais. In delirium and with clouding consciousness he sought to raise his body and stand, but his arms, too, were now unequal to the task. He found himself helpless, looking up at the twisted mockery in the stare of the sacred relic.

"Jaycee—what the hell—is that thing called?"

It's a Terran child's playthin'. A replica of somethin' called a bear.

"Does it always have those eyes?"

No. A child must have played with it until its eye-buttons came loose. It's said to have once belonged to Prosper Haltern, founder both of the Onaris colony and of the Seminary.

"Oh God—the eternal joke—"

You're delirious, Bron. Lie quietly. I'm sending for Doc.

"Damn you, Jaycee—don't you see it? Gladly my cross I'd bear—damn—crosseyed bear—"

Stop talking, Bron. You're shoutin' aloud. You're...

But Bron was almost laughing as the great darkness closed down.

IV

BRON, this is Doc. Listen to me carefully. You're on the Destroyer ship. They brought you aboard while you were still unconscious. I gather they've brought your temperature down and a De-

stroyer medic has given you a good examination. Trouble is he's come up with the wrong answer. He's decided to give you an injection of an antihistamine—in fact, he's preparing it now. Whatever happens, you mustn't have that injection.

"You got something useful out of Ander?"

Yes. The shirt is woven of crel, an indigenous Onaria fungus spore notorious for its parasitic attachment to human flesh. The body's only defence is histamine. If that damn fool reduces your body histamine before those spor filaments have quit, they're liable to germinate into mature crel nodules underneath your skin. These are about the size of a Terran cherry and about two hundred thousand of them developing in your flesh would literally tear you apart.

"What do you advise?"

Find a way to avoid anything being done until the shirt has quit of its own accord. It's your only chance. Is the shirt still firm?

With an effort Bron propped himself up on one arm and explored. "It's coming away around the edges, Doc."

Good sign. It should peel fairly rapidly once it starts to go. Another fifteen minutes could see you clean. Can you hold the medic off that long?

"I can try."

Bron scanned the room quickly.

Its sole door was fitted with a standard proximity lock keyed to operate only to the finger responses of those entitled to enter. Laboriously he climbed from bed, found his limbs unwilling to accommodate his action and collapsed in a heap on the floor. He dragged himself to an instrument stanchion and looked for tools with which to attack the lock. The only thing relevant was a surgical laser. Unsteadily he took it to the door.

The lock pattern was unfamiliar to him and he had no way of locating the critical sensory elements. A very real chance existed that interference would immobilize it in the open rather than the closed position. Finally he settled for merely shorting out the input leads. With a bit of luck the lock's malfunctioning would appear to have been an inherent fault and not the result of tampering. He carefully fired the laser into the input channel. The laser hole was almost invisible but the result was an untidy short-circuit that seared the finish on the door around the lock. Fortunately the damage looked sufficiently amateurish to let him remain in character.

Doc, who had been following the exercise through Bron's eyes, was critical.

How long will that hold them?

"Depends on how anxious they are to get in. Dismantling the lock would take about twenty minutes,

but the door could be cut away in seconds if necessary."

Bron lurched painfully back to bed and began working his fingers cautiously between his arm and the shirt. He soon found that the shirt was losing its consistency and shredding away in the manner of cotton wool. The underlying skin was red, swollen and moist with lymph, but otherwise undamaged. As he worked at it, the fibers began to come away more easily and almost half the garment had been removed before he heard noises at the door.

The first sounds were those of someone baffled by an inability to operate the lock. Soon came the sound of metal applied to the door as if to force it. Then silence for a period. Then action again and the lock was cut away with a heavy-duty laser beam.

AS THE medic entered, Bron, propped on one arm, was engaged in removing the last fragments of the shirt from his breast. As far as he could judge, the filaments adhering to his back had largely rubbed away on the bedding. The medic examined the lock with some consternation, at the same time glancing across to Bron and the fragmented shirt. Since there was no obvious connection between these two things, he left the lock to a technician and came across the room.

"You got it away, eh? How you manage tha'?"

"It's histamine sensitive." The swelling in Bron's throat had raised the pitch of his voice to a querulous piping tone. He lay back with a show of exhaustion he did not have to fake.

"Why you do it, eh? Why you put tha' damn thing on?"

Bron searched the synthesis but found no answer, so he scowled and said, "The shirt is an accepted penance in the eyes of the church."

"Bloody funny church—damn masochis's, all of them. Are there no psychiatris's on Onaris?"

"Certainly. I myself have a doctorate in psychiatry," said Bron Ander Haltern tiredly. "But what makes you think that ills of the spirit are curable by techniques designed to remedy mere malfunctions of the mind?"

The medic refused to be drawn into what he regarded as an idiotic argument. "Turn over and let me see tha' back."

Bron turned. The medic cleaned his back with spirit and wiped away the remaining fibers of the shirt, retaining some for closer examination. He found the crucifix around Bron's neck, looked at it curiously, dropped it back.

"I'm goin' to give you injection. With luck your skin should clear in a few hours. You'll find the side effects of the drug will make you li'le silly."

"Accept or refuse, Doc?"

Risk the injection now that the fibers have quit—but if you get a swelling yell like a fiend until they cut it out.

The medic turned to get his tray. As he did so Bron could see past him to the doorway. Standing just inside, a silent witness to the proceedings, was a tall, graying man of exceptional physique and bearing. He was clad immaculately in the uniform of a senior Destroyer officer, though his precise rank was not apparent. His attention was completely upon Bron, with a depth of concentration and comprehension that made Bron feel that the hypno-synthesis was a very shallow camouflage for concealing his true identity and purpose.

"Who's that?" asked Bron aloud as the medic returned.

"Colonel Daiquis'." Both the medic and Doc replied as nearly simultaneously as possible, but Doc Veeder's identification carried undertones of awe.

What a piece of luck, Bron. Martin Daiquist is Cana's right-hand man.

Bron withdrew his arm from the vicinity of the hypodermic gun. "I wish to see someone in authority. I was brought here without consent and I have no wish to remain. I demand to be returned to the Seminary."

The medic looked down pityingly. "Tomorrow someone will explain why tha's impossible."

His fingers gripped Bron's arm like a steel vise. "From now until then you do exactly as you're told."

Past the medic's shoulder Bron could see Colonel Daiquist examining the door around the lock. Then he saw him straighten suddenly and look round as if searching for something. The hypodermic gun was back on Bron's arm, the muzzle pressing hard as the molecularized drugs were introduced through his skin without puncture. Almost immediately Bron felt a heavy dream-like state come over him, bringing a touch of euphoria that left him quite without care or qualm as Daiquist picked up the surgical laser and took it to the door.

PERHAPS on the altar of some Satanic mass the screaming sacrifice, shackled to the stone, twists in torment. The descending dagger tears tendon and ligament but leaves alive the cowering consciousness . . .

"Who's that?"

... WHY DO YOU KEEP ON PRAYING? DON'T YOU KNOW THAT GOD IS DEAD?

"Tell me who you are or I'll go to sleep on you."

Don't do that, Bron. I'm having a hard enough task getting through to you as it is. I'm Ananias.

"Go away. I don't know you."

Don't you remember me at all?

Don't you even recall that Ananias is a liar?

"Ananias is merely a name. I can't remember a thing. You must be the joker of the pack."

Frequently, Bron. But right now I'm far from joking. What drugs did the medic give you?

"Should have been antihistamine and antiallergen."

But you didn't see the labels on the phials?

"No. He preloaded the hypodermic. I want to go to sleep."

Not so fast. From your poor reaction to the semantic recall I'd say the medic included a measure of a hypnotic alkaloid, possibly a truth serum.

"Damn you, let me sleep!"

I will—soon. But while you're sleeping I think someone may attempt to question you. Daiquist's not too happy about you for some reason. We can't rely on the synthesis holding out under intensive psychological probing. If the situation turns critical we intend to use one of our corrective circuits to throw you into a state of catatonic withdrawal. They'll soon get you out of it, but it should serve to confuse the situation.

The effort of conversation had pulled Bron into a lighter level of sleep from which he now found himself unable to relax. He tried to open his eyes, but the effort nearly defeated him and he was unable to maintain them open. In any case, the room was completely

dark and there was nothing whatever to see. His mind settled down to a level of activity characteristic of a dream state but which left him fully conscious. This limbo of thought between sleep and waking was positive confirmation of the introduction of a hypnotic drug into his system.

He likened his feelings to those of a man floating on an air raft borne over slow waters down a long tunnel of darkness. The almost complete absence of tactile sensation, coupled with the free-flowing volume of his thoughts and heightened imagination, produced all the imagery necessary to give substance to the illusion. He even thought he could hear the echoed muttering of the tide, disturbed by his passage, lapping against tunnel walls . . .

Shock! Even in his drugged condition his whole nervous system reacted fitfully.

"Ananias, for God's sake—"

What is it, Bron?

"What's that noise? Sounds like turkeys gobbling—or water rippling around a stone."

I hear nothing but ship noises. Sure its not imagination?

"Damn you, no. It must be coming over the bio-electronic transfer link."

Not possible. We're transmitting nothing but my voice. The computer's monitoring the output from the Antares transmitter to you and that doesn't show any

variation except for the usual star static.

"Well, I'm receiving something else and it's unholy—like the sound of liquid geese. Is it possible for anything else to get impressed on your transmission—something you couldn't detect?"

Only if it came from a source below the Antares reception threshold. But there's nowhere it could come from. There's only the void on the other side of your present position. You're way out on the rim of the universe.

"Can they increase the sensitivity of the Antares receivers?"

Not without rebuilding half a planet. Can you still hear it?

"It's still there, but not so clearly. The ambient ship noise seems to be increasing."

Correct. Sounds as though they're preparing for lift-off. I doubt you'll get any visitors until the ship's in free space. If you want to sleep, this'll be a good time.

"Ananias—"

Yes?

"Did we ever meet, you and I?"

We know each other rather well.

One day you'll remember.

"And Jaycee—I know her?"

I can't answer questions about Jaycee. That's classified.

"I just wondered what I ever did to get paired up with a vindictive bitch like her."

BRON attempted to relax, to throw himself into less con-

scious depths of slumber, but each time his mind washed up on the same dark, tunneled tide and stopped short at the same reactive fear. The sound of the rising pattern of activity in the ship gradually overlaid the phantom goose-mutter from nowhere and drove it below the limits of discernibility. The rising crescendo of the pressor beam projectors began to vibrate the whole fabric of the ship and the beats of their misresonance sang like some awful electronic choir.

Then he felt the lift-off—only a few meters at first, while the pressors were trimmed to take the weight of the ship evenly and without straining the vast structure. The breathtaking thunder of the planetary drive boomed in above the pressors' song and added a quarter gravity of horizontal component of movement to the pressor's lift. Some loose instruments somewhere in the room clattered into a tray, otherwise inside the ship these maneuvers were deceptively smooth and gentle. Outside the ship it would be different. Bron winced at the thought of white-hot exhaust gas razing a kilometer-wide weal across the scarred face of Ashur and of pressors leaving a hundred-kilometer channel of pulverized buildings and hopelessly compressed soil before the ship abandoned planetary support and began to claw its way through the

troposphere by thrust reaction alone.

As the successive phases of take-off approached, the pitch and timber of the engine voices altered, died, were replaced by other sounds. Soon even the scream of the atmosphere on the hull tailed away and the ship settled to the vibrant thunder of the main gravity drive, which would be its prime mover until it was clear of the planetary system of which Onaris was part. Not until then could the cumbersome physical drive systems be abandoned in favor of the delicate subspace mechanisms which could flip the ship to its destination at megahigh velocities without regard to mass or momentum.

Slowly Bron's ears became attuned to the dissonance of the engine, and he even dived into fitful sleep before becoming aware that the light in the room had been turned on and that two men had arrived at his side.

"Ander Haltern." This was a statement, not an address.

"Ah, so that's our master syncretist. He looks too young. You know, Martin, they say he's one of the most brilliant men alive."

"He came in wearing a shirt of some parasitic fungus. If that's brilliance, I prefer mediocrity." The second voice held a crisp bitterness of tone. A hand reached down and pulled at the crucifix on the chain, then let it go again.

"*Chacun à son gout*—sorry, Martin, I forgot you hated the old world and its babels. But every man to his own choice. Not everyone has a hobby such as yours—or is in a position to indulge in it even if he so desired."

"You've never objected before." The phrase was swiftly defensive.

"My dear Martin, I am not objecting. I was merely making the point that his desire to suffer pain and your desire to inflict it are merely two aspects of the same sort of character distortion."

A long, irritated silence fell.

Then: "Do you want to question him?"

"I don't particularly want a recital of hick-world lineage and aspirations tonight, Martin. We know he's Haltern, or he wouldn't have been where he was when we found him. Whether he's a prime catalyst we shan't know until we get to the rendezvous."

You listening, Bron?

"Yes." Subvocally.

Can you open your eyes and look at them. We've got the cameras on. A short blink will do.

Bron shifted his head as though in disturbed sleep, then fought his eyelids open for a few bleared instants while he focused on the faces of the two men beside him.

Nicely done, Bron. We've got what we wanted. One's Martin Daiquist, whom you've already seen. The other—man, you cer-

tainly pick your company well!

"Spool it, Ananias! I'm not thinking well tonight."

Just as well, perhaps. You've just been face to face with Cana himself.

V

HE AWOKED to the sound of a watch bell and sat up, shaking the sleep from his head. As the medic had predicted, his skin had cleared, except for a slight scale which feathered away as he touched it. The ache in his limbs, too, was now scarcely perceptible.

"Anyone awake?" He addressed his unseen mentors in a spirit of bravado.

Awake? Jaycee was annoyed. How the hell can anyone be otherwise with you snorin' your head off over the transfer link? How do you feel?

"Like it was Christmas in Europa."

Good. Your memory's returnin'. Though with your usual intake of drink and drugs it beats me how you ever managed to recall anythin' of Christmas in Europa.

"Tell me about Daiquist. I'm sure he suspected I fixed that door."

Martin Daiquist, ninth generation, Cana's lieutenant—and probably more ruthless than Cana himself. Responsible for the punitive expeditions against the four worlds

that held out against the formation of the Destroyer federation. Watch out for him. He's a mean cuss and as perceptive as the devil. His hobby is takin' people apart painfully.

"I'll bear that in mind. What are he and Cana doing here?"

We're still not sure. Neither would normally concern himself with a mere planetary raid. Either there's somethin' big on-line or else they've sensed the Com-mando interest in the raid and come to investigate personally. If the latter is the case, don't try any of your usual fool—

She broke off to give Bron a chance to concentrate as the medic entered. He gave Bron a swift but thorough examination.

"You bloody clear," he said. "You don' deserve it, treatin' your skin like tha'. I'll get you breakfas' sent, an' then you clear out, eh? An' if you come back here again, nex' time I'll use the knife on you—without anaesthetics. See how much masochis' you are. Colonel Daiquis' wants to see you—an' I don' advise you play the fool with him. I can' patch up a body after he's done."

Soon an orderly fetched a hot breakfast on a tray and the smell of baked meats and coffee made Bron wonder when he had last eaten. He could not remember. His own activities prior to the raid were still lost to him. The orderly also delivered a packet of cloth-

ing. Bron found inside a lightweight, tunic-style uniform, underclothes and a white gown that was presumably used for bathing and relaxation. Compressing his lips in wry amusement, he selected only the underclothes and the gown. Fortunately the gown had a pocket large enough to accommodate the Bible. The remaining garments he dropped into the surgical disposal chute, an action he felt certain was in keeping with his position as a Haltern.

When the medic came to escort him to Daiquist he raised his eyebrows at Bron's choice of apparel. "You're bloody mad you don' do as you're tol'." But his acceptance of Bron's assumed eccentricity was an encouraging sign that the incredible masquerade was viable and working.

DAIQUIST looked up from his desk as Bron entered.

"Ah, the syncretist. You seem to have recovered."

"Why am I here?" asked Bron sharply. "I demand to be returned to the Seminary."

Daiquist cocked his head on one side. "There's no chance of that—no chance at all. Even if we wished, it wouldn't be possible. And we don't wish. We came a long way to get you, Haltern."

"The familiar is Bron," said Bron archly.

“Very well—Bron. But don’t mistake your position. You are a prisoner just as surely as if you were chained to a wall. We hope—ultimately—to gain your cooperation. Until we do—and have satisfied ourselves of your integrity—you must consider yourself under close guard. I had myself preferred you to be conveyed in the fleshholds, but I was overruled. However, you will end up there if you engage in any mischief.”

Shortly the door opened and Cana himself came into the room. He looked searchingly at Bron, then took Daiquist’s place behind the desk. The impression he gave was that of a powerful intellectual rather than a ruthless creator and destroyer of empires.

“Leave us, will you, Martin.”

For a moment Daiquist appeared about to protest, then he turned and left the room, with a meaningful glance at the prisoner. Bron sensed that a dissension had already arisen over his status on the ship. Daiquist was profoundly displeased.

Alone with the great space tyrant, Bron sensed the magnitude of the man—Cana seemed to fill the room with a hypnotic presence.

“I don’t normally intervene in Martin’s affairs,” said Cana. “But I can’t afford to have a syncretist of your standing exposed

to Martin’s personal curiosity. By all accounts you’re a man of many talents. You could be very useful to us. But Martin’s a suspicious devil—a quality that often makes him invaluable. He has a theory about you, Syncretist. He suspects you are not who you claim to be.”

“I’m Bron Ander Haltern, master syncretist, late of Adano University on Onaris.”

“If that’s so, then you won’t mind answering a few questions. If you get a word wrong I’ll leave you to Martin.”

“I object to my word’s being doubted. I’ll answer anything you care to ask.” The synthesis was responding weakly but he picked up the feeling and amplified it himself, exaggerating the note of grievement.

Bron, this could be sticky. I’m getting Ander on the line to back you up.

“Check, Jaycee. I’m not getting much from the synthesis.”

Cana went to a cabinet and drew out a sheaf of papers. “You see, Bron Haltern, we already know quite a lot about you. Where is Jeddah?”

Trick question. Jeddah’s a town on Onaris—but the one a Haltern would remember first is Jeddah Haltern. He’s dead. The voice in Bron’s head was unfamiliar, but had a strong Onaris accent.

“Jeddah’s dead,” said Bron. The synthesis stirred weakly. “He was fifth generation. Had he

lived he'd have been a hundred and seven by now."

Good, but don't take chances.

Cana nodded and leafed through the sheets until he came to some plainly tabulated lists.

"Give me the title of the paper you presented to the Ninth Symposium of Galactic Science at Maroc on Priam."

The ninth symposium was on Mela five, not Priam. Priam was the tenth.

"Which do you want," asked Bron, "the paper from the tenth conference or the one given on Mela five?"

"Mela five, of course," said Cana, without looking back at the sheets. "I must have mistaken the line."

The Application of the Advancing-parameter Exclusion Theory to the Prognostic Delineation of the Patterns of Chaos.

Bron repeated this verbatim. Cana nodded and threw the sheaf of papers back on the table.

"You know, Syncretist, I don't entirely disagree with Martin. He has an instinct for these things and he's seldom wrong. He daren't be wrong. Our survival is often entirely in his hands. So I reserve an open mind. But if you aren't Haltern, then whoever did send you schooled you well—so well, perhaps, that whether you are the original or an impostor could be largely irrelevant."

"Now answer me a question,"

said Bron, watching the man closely. "Why have the Destroyer nations such urgent need for a master syncretist?"

"Not just a master syncretist. They come in all calibers, and we already have most of them. What we most needed was a man who could combine syncretics with an appreciation of the patterns of chaos."

"Why?"

"In a few hours," said Cana, "we are making a space rendezvous. When we are clear from there I may answer your question—or I may not. You may even answer it for yourself. Until then you have the freedom of the ship. The armorer will take your fingering for the proxlocks. You may enter any doors that open to you. The others are permanently barred to you. I'll have the quartermaster find you cabinspace."

CANA stood up, waved at the door. Bron needed no second indication of dismissal. He made his way straight to the den of the armorer. The latter took his fingering for the proxlocks and entered the resulting profiles in the access computer.

Bron made an experimental tour of most of the open levels of the ship to verify his freedom of the locks. Incredibly, almost all the doors he tried responded to his touch. Back in the small cabin which had been allocated to him,

he lay back on the bunk and called up his unseen confederates.

"Jaycee?"

No. This is Ananias. Honey-bitch is feeding—I suspect on her usual diet of ground-glass and snake venom. What do you make of Cana's giving you the freedom of the ship?

"I'm not quite sure. The main question is why. I suspect I'm being allowed just about enough rope to hang from, unless I've got it calculated wrong. The only sectors I haven't been able to enter are Weaponry, Communications and part of the computing complex. It's too damn easy. I'm willing to bet they log every meter I move."

How about the control room? We need to know the ship's destination as soon as possible.

"I've not yet tried Control. I don't dare seem too interested in the machinery here. Anyway, there's some sort of space rendezvous coming up shortly and the chances are that our heading will be different from there out. Once they start setting for a subspace hop I can pick up the coordinates straight from the subspace matrices if necessary—without even entering control."

Good idea. Mind you, they shouldn't be too worried. If they keep you out of Communications they can be reasonably confident that whatever you learn can't be relayed to where it might

be dangerous. I think our concept of the bio-electronic transfer link is sufficiently unique for it to remain completely unsuspected.

"I wish I were sure it is unique. I'm still worried about that goose-gobble I heard. Something else is operating on our transmission band. It certainly wasn't star static or a normal sort of interference."

From calculation it seems that there's nothing near you in space that could conceivably be the signal source. The present hypothesis is that it's a heterodyne signal from something on the ship itself.

"It was no heterodyne. I'd say it had all the elements of an intelligent semantic content based on an advanced-level communications system."

I'll follow it up, but I think you're certainly wrong. Hullo! What are they doing with your engines?

Bron listened critically. "Applying retro, I think. Could mean we're approaching rendezvous."

Rendezvous with what?

"It hasn't been said or implied, but I'd guess with the remainder of the Destroyer fleet, including those that held orbit round Onaris during the raid."

I wonder why. They wouldn't dare to attempt to hold formation in subspace, so why assemble beforehand?

"Sounds as though they're put-

ting call signs on the boards right now. The center of attention seems to be the chartroom."

Better not look too nosy. Wait till the rendezvous has been established, then go up.

"Are you giving me orders, Ananias?"

Yes. Have you forgotten how to take them?

"Let's get this straight," said Bron. "I'm on the operating end of the transfer link. Mine's the hide that pays for any mistakes and mine's the body they consign to space when the charade goes sour. Ask for any information you need, but how and when I obtain it is my option. If you want a puppet, jet off and buy yourself a doll."

Say that softly, little soldier. Ananias's voice was dangerous. You've more than one electrode in your brain and the controls are under my fingers on this console. Shall I read the decals? Catatonic Withdrawal. Anaesthesia With Maintained Consciousness. Punishment. Death. They aren't written that way, of course—we're great believers in the use of symbols to gloss over the earthier and more painful facts of your existence—but the effects are just those. You see, we can insist on discipline.

"You've forgotten a button, Ananias."

I think not.

"While you're playing at being

God, shouldn't you also have one with the symbol for resurrection?"

THE sudden cutoff of the gravity drive threw a vast silence over Bron's immediate environs, a stillness punctuated only by muted ship noises. The call boards were still chiming the re-assembly call. Bron left his cabin and went to investigate. For several minutes the gangways were full of crewmen hastening to re-group. Moving aside to allow one to pass, Bron was instead saluted smartly.

"Mastership Haltern, Cana wishes you to join Colonel Daiquist and himself in the chartroom."

Bron nodded, trying to analyze the attitude of the crewman. His instructions appeared to include the implication to treat Bron with the respect due a Destroyer officer. This could only be a reflection of Haltern's value as a master syncretist to the Destroyer nations. A suspicion slowly formed.

"Ananias, answer me something. What factors made you so sure Ander Haltern was the only man on Onaris the Destroyers would select?"

A knowledge of the Onaris intellectual scene coupled with some good guesswork. Why?

"Because the fact that it worked

is too damn much of a coincidence. They must have had a very distinct reason for picking up Haltern alone and you must have known exactly what that reason was. Now give me the facts."

I already have given them to you.

"Liar."

Ananias laughed softly. *So you do remember just a little about Ananias?*

"Only that you aren't to be trusted."

Of course not. But there's absolutely nothing you can do about it.

"Think again, Ananias," said Bron. "As agent on this team I've a right to any information I consider relevant. Tell Doc I want a straight answer to the question I asked you—the data so far available looks very suspect."

In the chartroom he found the atmosphere electric with tension. All the navigation staff, including those off duty, were gathered to watch the screens. In the deep-space sector station both Daiquist and Cana were present, watching points of light against the cosmic black.

Daiquist looked up, saw Bron and scowled, then beckoned him to join them. By the time Bron had reached the deep-sector station all eyes were again intent on the screens and no explanations were offered. Daiquist was supervising some chronometric plot-

ting—whatever event was about to take place obviously had time as an important component of the equation. Bron settled for a position with a good view of a subsidiary monitoring screen, a situation which also afforded him an opportunity to watch the activities in the whole station. The screen itself gave him an impressive view of the bright ring of ships of the Destroyer fleet now locked in tight formation and motionless, waiting for something to happen.

As the minutes passed, so the tension grew. Then, as if following some indefinable clue, the deep-space controller signaled.

"I think this is it."

He rapidly centered some almost invisible object under the graticules of his screen and began calling coordinates. All the other scanners turned outward to face the depths of space, though few others had the range to detect an object at such a distance. Daiquist and Cana pressed forward to look over the controller's shoulder. The displayed image as yet had no form, being a mere scatter of electronic noise.

Within seconds the computers had acquired sufficient data to begin processing and the screen picture steadied to a rocklike concentricity in the graticules as electronic fingers searched and corrected for the minute signal reflection from some remote

splint of matter far in the emptiness of space.

"That's it."

Cana had acquired a printout from a computer peripheral and a second printout terminal was already making a comparison with something set deep in the computer's micromemory cells.

Daiquist returned to the chronometric plotting and watched the pantograph arms begin to sweep wide curves across the plotting boards. His lips grew taut.

"Only sixteen point one hours late this time. The positional accuracy is exact and the chronological accuracy is still improving."

"Damn," said Cana. "Still I suppose we must be thankful for those two certainties among all the patterns of chaos. I'm getting a bit old for entropy." He glanced up and saw Bron's quizzical interest. For a second his eyes looked into Bron's with a depth of comprehension that rocked Bron back on his heels.

"I have a curious feeling about you, Syncretist. There's something in your face that suggests you know what chaos is. I just wonder if your being here is a fact any less calculated than the timing and trajectory of *those*."

HE NODDED back to the screens. Bron's eyes followed, fascinated, as the range closed and the scanners steadily improved

in resolution. His first impression was that of a rectangular plate or a door tumbling slowly and aimlessly through the depths of space. The speed with which the details improved was a measure of the very considerable velocity with which the object was moving, yet viewed through the screens against the backdrop of the farther galaxies, its progress appeared leisurely indeed.

As it neared it became more distinct in form. Seven long, thick, black cylinders, reminiscent of those used for compressed gas, had been strapped to a thick, black yoke. That appeared to be all; no instruments, no antenna, no solar panels were visible—none of the delicate and complex sensory and corrective mechanisms usually associated with unmanned space-traversing objects. If anything, the overall impression was one of extreme age and durability rather than of technological prowess. There was something incredibly sinister about these black canisters tumbling idly through space.

The scanners were now producing almost a close-up view of the object and the hideous weld seams, massive and unfettled, stood out plainly. Had somebody broken off a part of some ancient gas-cooking plant and hurled it carelessly into space, the effect would have been similar. But there was nothing careless about its tra-

jectory, to judge from the meticulous care with which its path was being recorded by the Destroyer technicians. Some great and desperate event seemed about to happen, but everyone about Bron was too intent on some given task to offer explanations.

He gasped as the reeling mass filled the screens, as though falling straight upon Cana's ship. But this was a trick of screen magnification. Suddenly the scanners reeled and Bron found himself watching the object falling away in a higgledy-piggledy tumble as it passed through the ring of watching ships.

Daiquist was again busy watching the chronometric plotting, as successive sweeps of the pantograph thickened the once faint traces to multiple bands of lines like the diagram of a muscular skeleton. Cana watched the cylinders draw away, his face a cloud of darkness. Then with sudden decision he turned his back on the screens and walked away.

His path took him past Bron and his eyes widened sagely.

"Watch that one through, Syncretist. I shall want to talk to you after."

WONDERING, Bron stepped forward into Cana's vacated seat with the main screen in full view before him. Remorselessly the crossed hairs of the screen graticule locked on to the path of

the retreating canisters, which appeared to diminish slowly in size and then advance again as the magnification was periodicaly adjusted to offset the increasing range. Bron followed their dark passage with deep interest. The nemesis appeared to have passed, but the tension in the chartroom was undiminished. So intent was he on following the progress of the cylinders framed at the center of the screen that he neglected the implication of the changing hues of the background.

Onaris! Ananias's voice broke in on his thoughts. *Give us a broader view, Bron.*

Bron scanned the whole screen area, realizing with a start that the variegated background hues were, in reality, the non-focused outlines of seas and continents. Inexorably the black cylinders continued under the crossed hairs of the graticule, while the physical details of the planetary surface began to grow in resolution.

The moment of impact was unforgettable.

The blossoming fireball must have extended into space a full planetary diameter, a gulf of fantastic fiery plasma that streaked up and out with a velocity beyond the regions of belief. From his knowledge of physics Bron knew that such a fantastic holocaust must have stripped the atmosphere from the planet in sec-

onds. The next stage was a sort of coalescenced, the fireball contracting and drawing in upon itself as if to concentrate its essence. The color shifted from red to brilliant yellow, surrealistic with an ethereal fringe of mercurial blue. Around it the planetary features reappeared, but not with the cool greens and buffs of before. Now whole continents stood out as if raised to cherry heat, and where the seas had been were bowls of black, crawling with fire like soot on a chimney.

Then the planet broke up, not quickly, but with the wrong-seeming slowness of massive events seen from a distance; a kind of reluctant finality. Centered upon the spot where the fireball had condensed, the planet began to spew up its liquid core in a gout of molten heavy metals, which coalesced in space and drew back toward the gravitic center of the mass, obliterating continents and coastlines with a horrific tide of matter returned to the state from which the planet had once cooled. As this happened, the shell of the planet broke, continents rearing crazily on end like ships sinking on a sea and land masses floating in broken fragments like dross on molten tin.

Bron kept no record of the hours that passed while this incredible scene was enacted. The death of individuals was something he had been trained to accept uncon-

ditionally; the death of nations was one of the aims of war. Even whole species died occasionally in the name of some cause—but the death of an entire planet was something that rendered Man and his entire status in the universe of no greater account than a biological culture grown in a dish and discarded when the experiment was finished. This was an object lesson in finite reality.

VI

“**A**LL right, Ananias, so I’ve seen it. Now explain it to me.” Bron’s voice was hardened by his viewing of the incident.

How do you think they got the name Destroyers, Bron?

“But where did the hellburner come from? It didn’t originate from this fleet.”

It wouldn’t. A ship carrying weapons like that would scarcely be invited to make planetfall on a flesh raid. Even in standoff orbit it could be a liability. They must keep it clear out in the void. When the raid is finished it slides in a massive hellburner to take care of the evidence.

“I shouldn’t have thought that Cana needed to destroy the evidence. He’s strong enough not to care what the Galaxy thinks.”

In five years galactic patrols have found around thirty-seven formerly inhabited planets turned in-

to nickel-iron slag balls. Eleven of these, equipped with subspace transmitters, had broadcast warnings of Destroyer attack shortly before their obliteration. Five others put out standard light-velocity-limited transmissions with the same theme. Some of these planets were dead three years before anyone got the message.

Bron considered this in silence for a moment.

“Tell me, Ananias, what was the population of Onaris?”

About two hundred million.

“Then if we knew the Destroyers were coming when they did, why the hell didn’t we have a fleet waiting for them instead of only me?”

If we’d known that Daiquist and Cana were with the party, we probably would have had our fleet there. As it was we were merely implementing a policy decision to locate their baseworld.

“Policy decision? That decision just cost two hundred million Onarians their lives. What kind of policy is that?”

Bron froze as a hand clamped on his shoulder. Daiquist dropped into the seat next to him.

“Why so thoughtful, Syncretist? Have you never seen a world destroyed before?”

“That was Onaris,” said Bron flatly. “All gone. In the name of God, why did you have to do it? You’d had presumably already taken all that you came for.”

Daiquist’s eyes were searching Bron’s face critically. “I rather wonder if we didn’t get a little more than we came for. You make me uneasy, Syncretist. I never did have much time for intellectuals—and an intellectual with the build and tone of a fighting man definitely needs watching. For myself I wouldn’t take the risk. I’d prefer to kill you-now, but Cana has decided otherwise. I advise you to prove him right.”

Bron returned the scrutiny in depth. “You still haven’t answered my question. Why was it necessary to destroy Onaris?”

“Syncretist you may be,” said Daiquist, “but you’ve still got a hell of a lot to learn. Come, Cana wants to see you in his suite. We’re going to give you the chance to do a little exercise in cooperation.”

“Cooperation? My God—you expect me to cooperate with you after *that*?” He made a dramatic gesture toward the spotted fire-cherry that was all that was left of Onaris on the screen. “I would rather die.”

“I’d rather you died,” said Daiquist. “Unfortunately the decision isn’t mine. But listen carefully to what Cana has to say, because it’s likely you’ll change your mind.”

“You don’t bend a Haltern that easily. Damn you, Daiquist! If I must take this journey, let it be in the flesh holds.” The synthesis still stirred weakly.

Steady, Bron. Ananias's voice was cautioning.

"I don't happen to be offering you the choice." Daiquist drew his sidearm menacingly. "It's not a good idea to keep Cana waiting. If you're thinking of resistance—remember that I never shoot to kill."

HAVING no option, Bron rose and reluctantly walked in the indicated direction. Daiquist followed, his weapon aimed low. At the door of Cana's suite Bron was surprised to find the lock respond easily to his own hand. Cana was sitting at a large desk, watching strip issuing from a computer printout terminal. This had evidently been his occupation for some time, for the floor was littered with discarded strip lengths printed with compact series of figures.

"Ah, Syncretist." Cana kicked the sprawling strips into an untidy pile. "Stay with us, will you, Martin."

"It might be wisest." Daiquist selected a chair and gestured Bron to another. Cana addressed himself to Bron.

"I take it from your face that you've seen what happened to Onaris."

"I've seen what happened. What I can't establish is why it was necessary. Surely you'd already taken what you wanted?"

Cana frowned, a display indi-

cating a depth of concentration outside Bron's experience.

"You won't understand this yet, but it was precisely because we'd taken what we wanted that Onaris died. Almost our only means of establishing the success of a raid is whether a hellburner blasts the life out of the target planet within hours of our liftoff."

Bron was silent for a long second, wrestling with the wrongness of this statement. Finally he looked back at Cana and shook his head.

"That doesn't make sense."

"It does to us. The point I wish to make clear to you is that we didn't put that hellburner down there. Somebody else did."

He's lying, Bron. Ananias's voice was positive.

"You don't expect me to believe that?"

"In the circumstances, no. I know your intellectual record and I realize it precludes you from accepting a statement unless you are satisfied with the evidence on which it's based. I'm therefore giving you the opportunity of establishing and examining your own evidence—and drawing your own conclusions."

"How?"

"I invite—no, dare you—to examine any available record from any ship of this fleet and attempt to calculate the source and time of origin of the missile that de-

stroyed Onaris. Two points I would add. One—although the missile's position was exact, its arrival was sixteen point one hours late in time. Two—"Cana swung full-face to Bron for emphasis and Daiquist raised his sidearm meaningfully—"you may have access to our video records of the screens and any other data in our possession to enable you to calculate the missile's exact point of impact on Onaris. Although its effect would have been the same wherever it had struck, I think you'll find its point of impact coincides exactly with your own position sixteen point one hours earlier. You see, Bron Haltern, that missile wasn't specifically intended for Onaris—or even for us. That missile was intended for you—personally."

WHAT you makin' of it, Bron?
"Not sure, Jaycee. Could be an elaborate sort of game—a trick to secure the cooperation of whatever intelligentsia they have lifted in a raid. Or it could be that Cana's quite genuine when he says that the Destroyer's aren't to blame."

Ananias doesn't think so. He was as mad as a scalded tiger when you accepted Cana's invitation to check out the data on the hellburner.

"I'm not sure that I trust Ananias any more than I trust Cana. Do you record everything that

transpires over the transfer link?"

It's all sound- and video-taped for future reference. Why?

"Tell Doc I'd like to check back through the sessions I've had with Ananias. I'm not convinced I'm getting the right answers."

Uh! Even in amnesia the mistrust isn't dead. If you're taking on Ananias you'd best be reminded he's a pretty dangerous cuss.

"So am I, Jaycee. And the way I see this mission, it's strictly one-way, so I don't have anything to lose. Will you do it?"

With pleasure. I'd love to get hold of something that would make the Godlost weaklin' sweat.

"Then stay on the line—because there are things about General Ananias that I'm beginning to remember."

Bron had acquired a master-program panel in part of the computing complex to which he had access. Two Destroyer programmers had been assigned to him and a duty technician was on sound and vision call. All were quickly supplying whatever services or data Bron chose to ask for. Bron, relying less on the failing Haltern synthesis than on his own training, was speedily assessing his requirements and impressing the information on a standard location-of-source space-weapons program. The information available from the ring of Cana's fleetships through which the object had passed added a dimensional certainty to his calcula-

tion that was normally lacking in similar studies.

Cana can't hope to get away with this, Bron. Any computer-man worth his salt and given access to the data you're gettin' must be able to give the lie to the claim.

"Unless the computer is bent. There's a lot of this computing complex I can't get near. They could be using it to apply correctives so that I can only get the answers they want me to have."

That's why we're readin' everythin' through you, Bron. We're going to run the same computation here so we can compare differences.

"Fine. I'm just about through on the location-of-source program. I'll set it running."

We're going to rewrite the program to suit our equipment. We've got all the data we need, so we won't be far behind you.

Bron called the Destroyer technician. "How's that video record coming on?"

"She nearly ready, if you like to come up to projection room."

Bron cast a hurried glance over his own series of figures, then passed it to the programmers. In the projection room the technician was waiting.

"Ah've put the las' two hundred frames before explosion on closed loop. Give you las' four seconds of approach withou' spoilin' definition."

"Run it."

Bron dropped into a seat before the screens.

The Destroyer technician looked at him briefly; his smile acknowledged the professional competence in Bron's way of organizing his inquiries. "Ah'll put her on big screen, Mr. 'altern."

"The form of address is Mastership," said Bron severly. "Have you got that reconnaissance photograph of Ashur yet?"

"Jus' comin' on facsimile printer. Soon as scan is complete we'll print projection slide for montage."

"I don't want montage. I want to alternate the scanner image with the reconnaissance projection."

"Ah get poin' now. You alternate two images a' same magnification, you able pinpoint' position of contac' within few hundred meters."

"To be certain, I need to locate to within one meter."

The technician whistled. "Tha's no' possible, Mastership."

"Call me Bron."

The technician smiled broadly. "Ah'm Camaj. You no amateur, Bron. You know wha' you're doin'. Ah've tried some fixes in my time, but this the closes' Ah ever tried."

"Can you do it?"

"A fix to one meter from t'irty million kilometers? You need be jokin' "

"I'm not joking, Camaj. I do need that accuracy to be sure."

"Then we do i' as you say. You show me how."

THE screen lit up with the video-recorded last four seconds before the missile struck, repeated endlessly from the closed tape loop. In these last fragments of time for Onaris, the image of the city of Ashur flashed briefly into focus, a mere vague pattern of blocked browns and grays, unrecognizable as it stood, meaningful only if compared with a more detailed view. Central in the field of view was the black shape of the missile still aimlessly atwist in the instants before its terrible reaction.

The scene was swiftly replaced with a projected reconnaissance holograph of Ashur taken from a ship orbiting around Onaris before the cataclysm. Here the ground details stood out with perfect clarity, with buildings, vehicles, and even the minute dots of individuals easily identifiable. The magnification of the projection was adjusted to that of the taped record and then the two images were alternated to show coincidences of outline. Roughly half the reconnaissance record had been traversed before the two patterns showed point for point similarity. Bron's final micro-adjustments took fully half an hour.

"Jaycee, what was my exact position sixteen point one hours before the explosion?"

You were chained in the alcove

at the west end of the church of the Sacred Relic. The Destroyer party was just about to collect you.

"You saw where the hellburner struck?"

Yes. At the west end of the church slightly to the right of the centerline. In other words, it went as near as possible right down on to that alcove.

"Correct. Which is too much of a coincidence to be true. I don't like coincidences that can be measured with a micrometer attachment."

He glanced up and saw the technician watching him. "Convinced, Camaj?"

"Ah'm convinced. Tha' technique Ah use again. Will tha' be enough?"

Bron nodded. "More than enough to be going on with. How the hell does anyone project a hellburner from outspace with that sort of accuracy?"

The technician shrugged his shoulders. "You're th' syncretis'. For me, wonder is how she gets through atmosphere withou' burnou'. After all, she has no nose cone—"

"Jaycee, you heard that?"

Yes, Bron. We'd picked up the same point. Not only remarkable weaponry, but a remarkable weapon too. It should have burned out in the atmosphere at that velocity, but there was no sign it even got hot.

"All the more reason to find out

where it came from." Bron dismissed the technician and went back to the computing section. The computer had already printed out the directional components and was engaged in comparing lists of known spatial objects which had occupied trajectory intercept positions at previous points in time. A mere glance at the time scale in which it was now seeking a match stopped Bron's heart a full beat.

When the final printout came he folded the paper deftly with the characters inside and without looking at them.

Let's see the answers, Bron. Ananias's voice cut sharply into his head.

"No. Let me hear yours first."

I'm not asking. That's an order.

"Get off my back, Ananias."

You b— Ananias's voice was suddenly cut off. Fragments of conversation followed too low in volume for Bron to catch. Finally Jaycee's voice came through.

Sorry about that, Bron. Ananias was throwing his weight about. I don't think he'll try it again—not in that way. As we see it, there has to be a ship out in the void. The location of source tensor carried back to known spatial objects on the trajectory doesn't make sense. The only intercept is a location in Messier 31.

"The spiral nebula in Andromeda?"

No less. Travelin' at its sublu-

minimal velocity from there would have taken all of seven hundred million years, so I think we can rule that one out.

Bron unfolded the printout. "All of which figures agree with mine. The Destroyer computer isn't bent."

So Cana does have a hellburner carrier way out in the void.

"It looks as though somebody has. I wouldn't be too certain it was Cana."

What you meanin', Bron?

"My dear Jaycee, Cana sent his crew to the Seminary because Haltern was due to take up his residency there. That was a reasonable action based on prior intelligence. But when that hellburner was launched not even Cana could have known exactly where in the Seminary Haltern would be at any specific time. In fact, the only off-worlders who knew at all times my precise position were Doc Veeder, Ananias—and yourself."

ANANIAS turned from the screen, critical disgust written broadly on his face.

"So much for your ability to handle Bron, honey-bitch. Let him break away like that again and I'll have you reduced to walking the streets—and knowing your poisonous talents I doubt if you'd make much of a success of even that."

"Jet off, you Godlost runt." Jaycee smoldered cobra-bright.

“What you doin’—tryin’ to drum up some pimpin’ for the day you lose your pension?”

Ananias glanced involuntarily at the tabs on his shoulders. His small, pink lips were even more moist than usual and his bright eyes seemed to be reflecting some traumatic inner fire.

“Don’t underestimate me, honey-bitch. I could do it, you know.”

“Sick dreams, Ananias. You’ll be lucky to retain your commission when Doc gets through with you.”

The import of her phrase took a full second before it produced a shock reaction.

“Say that again—slowly, honey-bitch.” His voice was sharp and suspicious.

“Don’t play innocent. You know its against regulations to destroy recordin’s of transfer-link sessions.”

“What?” In his anger Ananias raised his hand as though to strike her, but forbore with the agonized realization that before his blow could fall she would probably have broken his arm. He forced himself into a more calculating mood.

“Who put you on to that?”

“Bron—askin’ questions.” She was enjoying his discomfort.

“And you told Doc?”

“Of course. I even booked him a call to Commando Central so he didn’t get time to cool off.”

“That was very stupid, honey-bitch.” Ananias was struggling

with his anger. “Doc should never have made that call. I carry the General Staff mandate—and that means I effectively outrank everyone on this installation. If it suits me to destroy some or even all of the recordings, neither you nor Medic-commander Veeder has any business interfering.”

“You’re damn wrong there.” Veeder, entering the door had caught the trailing end of the conversation. Although his expression remained within its authorized lines of concern, the reddening of his face and neck showed the height of his inner feelings. “I’ll remind you, General Ananias, that this is a Commando installation and subject only to Commando control.”

“And I’ll remind you,” said Ananias, “that you are engaged on a joint mission with Intelligence under a GenStaff Order. That places you under my jurisdiction. So far, I can’t say I’m impressed with your handling of the situation. Honey-bitch has demonstrated lamentably little control over her agent and as for Bron himself—look at the kind of mental cripple I’m expected to work through: concussion, amnesia, schizophrenia and persecution paranoia—to say nothing of refusal to accept orders, insubordination and outright rebellion.”

“You’re a fine one to talk about mental cripples.” Jaycee was furious. “Anyway, Ananias, where did you get the idea Bron suffers from

persecution paranoia? I've seen nothing of it. It couldn't just be on part of the record you found it convenient to erase?"

"Honey-bitch," said Ananias dangerously, "I've already told you what I'm going to do for you. And as for Doc, I think premature retirement on a greatly reduced pension would still be more than justice. As of tomorrow, I'm bringing in Intelligence operatives to take over your function here."

"Drop dead, Ananias." Veeder subconsciously adopted Jaycee's infectious mood of contempt. "At my request, Commando Central has verified that the operating arm of this mission remains under my control. Your capacity is purely advisory. As far as I'm concerned, you're here on sufferance."

"I shall contest that decision with GenStaff. You can't hope to win."

"Perhaps not, but while the order stands you will not destroy my records and you will not interfere with the operation of this installation."

"And suppose I do?"

VEEDER'S face broke into a taut glimmer of amusement, which was the nearest he allowed himself to approach to human triumph.

"If you do, General Ananias, you'll find yourself under close arrest in a Commando cell block awaiting trial by court martial."

"You couldn't hold me."

"I could—for long enough to see this mission through without interference."

Jaycee said: "*Touché!*" in a manner calculated not to improve Ananias's declining temper.

White-faced, Ananias turned to face the pair of them. For a moment it was uncertain whether he was nearer laughter or tears.

"You won't get away with this, you know. Within a week this unit will be entirely under my control."

"Don't need a week, Ananias." Jaycee was on the point immediately. "Any time now Bron should have the coordinates we need. That was the mandate, wasn't it—the establishment of the location of the Destroyer's baseworld? It's all over then except for the shoot-in'."

"Not quite over, honey-bitch. I'll have a few old scores to settle first."

Doc moved back to the attack. "In the meantime, Ananias, there are questions that need answering."

"Such as?"

"The goose-mutter which Bron heard—to which I would have attached no great significance had you not bothered to erase all reference from the tapes."

"And?"

"The question of how you could be so certain that Ander Haltern was the only Onaris technocrat who would interest the Destroyers?"

Ananias was fazed momentarily. "I thought that was all—"

"Destroyed? Not quite, Ananias. The transfer link to Antares is routed through Commando Signals. They also make recordings of everything transmitted or received."

"That will have to be stopped."

"You'll need a damn good reason."

"I have one."

"Then let's have it. The Commandos have spent nearly a quarter of their total budget for six years just setting up this project and my best agent's out on that Destroyer ship right now. If there are any facts we haven't been given, I suggest you give them fast. I'm damn sure Commando Central would never have agreed to cooperate this far if they had had a suspicion something was being held back."

"There are levels of Security," said Ananias. "This one is out of the topmost drawer. The fewer people there are who know, the better."

"You're lyin', Ananias. Even Veeder was surprised by the vehemence of Jaycee's attack. "I know when you're lyin' because it's the only time you look human. God! Security's just a word you use for gettin' your own way without question—but don't be so naive as to try it on me. You're up to something and it stinks."

"Honey-bitch," said Ananias,

"you'd better keep a cautious tongue in that viperous head of yours."

"Jet off, you blackmailin' runt! Don't try threatenin' me. Don't you realize I could finish you any time I chose?"

"How's that, honey-bitch?"

"You fixed Bron's psycho-synthesis and the semantic recall triggers—but I had a few tricks with Bron extendin' way back before your time. Just one word from me could put Bron on the defensive—then he won't cooperate no matter what you do. How you goin' to survive that, Ananias?"

"Get away from those controls, Jaycee. That's an order."

"Go to hell, Ananias," said Medic-commander Veeder.

"When you've finished the infighting, perhaps you could spare me an observer." Bron's mocking voice broke suddenly through the speakers. "I'm going to try to get the coordinates from the subspace cavity."

"Engaged." Jaycee forsook the argument and became quickly absorbed in rapport with the screens, her hands delicately trimming the controls by sense of touch alone.

"Full recordin' facility on, Bron. I'm followin'."

Ananias shrugged resignedly and stalked toward the computer. Only when the ship coordinates had been firmly established and were ready for transpositions would he dare to interfere. But once

he did move, the results would have to be swift, massive and final. There was no room for mistakes nor for the toleration of opposition at this stage of the game. Far too much had already gone wrong.

VII

THE call boards began to chime the reassembly call. Almost imperceptibly Bron began to feel the additional components of gravity as the main drive was run up to full power. Watching the pattern on the board, he waited for the alert of the subspace team and gave it time to reach stations before he attempted to follow. It was obvious that the ship's present mode of gravity drive was merely meant to provide steerage for a fast subspace passage. The situation suggested that the matrices would be used as soon as they had been programed.

He was nearing the end of his time of waiting. Soon he had to pick up—either from the chart-room or directly from the subspace matrix—the coordinates that would betray the location of the Destroyer baseworld. At that point his own mission ended. The massed forces of the Stellar Commando, probably reinforced with the more spiteful dreadnoughts of the Terran Federation's combined navies, would split whole star systems apart if necessary just to destroy the world the Destroyers

had made the basis of their might.

The battle would undoubtedly be the biggest space war in history—its winners would become a legend. Bron doubted anyone would ever see or hear again of a Commando called Bron who would have made the whole thing possible. At some point the incredible nemesis awaiting Cana and his forces would catch up with the Destroyer ship in which Bron now traveled and his end would come.

The lower corridors were almost empty and it was easy for him to pass through the minor gangways unobserved. Timing was important—he dared not be too soon and he must not be too late. Even now the subspace team should be setting up its fantastic and delicate instruments to define the two points in space between which the ship would leap into the tachyon quasidimension.

Although of a design unfamiliar to Bron's hypno-synthesis or his real memories, the entrance to the subspace installation bore the usual features dictated by the invariable principles of superluminal mechanics. The positive air pressure forced a gale around him as he opened the hatch. In the access tunnel he allowed the cyclone air streams to swirl about him, the boiling turbulence removing the more gross dust and lint on his garments. Somewhere in his awareness lurked a fa-

miliarity with subspace mechanisms that bred caution rather than contempt. Not for a second did he attempt to disregard the elaborate precautions necessary to protect the delicate mechanisms in the cavity beyond.

At the tunnel barrier he exchanged his sandals for a pair of the soft, clinging shoes on the rack and carefully dragged on the flexible rubber suit, which clung to his body like a second skin. Although the suit was designed to accommodate a Destroyer uniform, it would in no way encompass his gown. He was finally forced to discard the latter and proceed with the rubber hotly uncomfortable against his bare body. He passed through the stinging detergent sprays and rinses and then the dryer. Only when this ritual had been carefully performed did he dare to penetrate beyond.

The anteroom, where the subspace crew would wait during the jump, was empty. Next came the labyrinth and beyond this the matrix cavity itself, always a place of darkness and wonder. Basically the cavity was nothing but a skeletal box between the great electrodes, surrounded by a gallery from which the technicians worked. Within the box, created and maintained by the field conditions which gave the atmosphere its green and awesome fluorescence, burned the billions

upon billions of replica stars, a complete section of the cosmos in miniature. No illumination was permissible save for the luminescence of the field and the technicians were too intent on working to notice a watching shadow hard against the outer wall. Only their faces were visible, illuminated by the eerie glow, like a gaggle of witches engaged in some wild, black art.

With infinite care and delicacy the micron-straight, hair-fine probes were being extended like nearly invisible copper strands across the star matrix, defining positions and axes and measuring critical paths, probing always through the infinitesimally small spaces between the patterns of ersatz stars. Slowly across the micro-universe they were weaving the copper webs which would define the positions of entry and termination of their superluminal jump through tachyon space.

BRON watched the work from knowledgeable eyes, his training or programing—he had no way of telling which—enabling him to assess the various criteria and thus the progress of the operation. Finally he judged it was time to move.

“I’m going to try to pick up the coordinates soon, Jaycee. I’ll leave you to do the recording while I merely observe.”

Engaged, Bron.

Bron moved slowly around the perimeter gallery. If he was noticed at all by the subspace team they must either have assumed he was one of their own number or else that he had legitimate business in the cavity. In any event, nobody questioned his presence, and the painstaking work of aligning coordinates went on without interruption. When Bron was sure the final settings had been made he cautiously inspected each gauge turret in turn. Despite his arrangement with Jaycee he silently filed the figures from the dim digital indicators into a mnemonic key as he went. Jaycee, for her part, verbally confirmed her reception of the sequences.

"I'm getting out now, Jaycee. I have to get clear before the crew leaves. I don't relish the idea of being trapped in here during the jump. Have you got all the figures you need?"

I think so. We'll transpose back into real-space coordinates and get them on transmission immediately.

Bron turned to negotiate the labyrinth.

"I suppose you'll be signing off soon? You've got all I came for."

We're scheduled to maintain contact at least until we get confirmation of the destruction of the baseworld. That's the GenStaff requirement. But I think Doc wants to keep the proj-

ect going purely as a Commando exercise. Ananias has been playing a rather peculiar game—he's made us think there may be more in this affair than appears at the surface.

Bron was swiftly stripping the rubber suit from his sweating body. "Tell me in a minute, Jaycee. Looks as though they're going to jump fast."

Behind him he could hear movements in the labyrinth as the subspace crew vacated the cavity for the duration of the jump. He was well past the subspace anteroom, but still visible from its doorway. In the suit Bron had made an anonymous figure in the cavity darkness, but in his gown his identity was unmistakable. Only by gaining the hatch before the first crewman emerged from the labyrinth could he hope to conceal his intrusion.

Even as the outer hatch was closing he heard behind him a sudden buzz of conversation and the click of a communications handset. It was impossible to tell if this was a routine incident or whether he had been seen and his presence reported. Although his presence in the cavity in no way exceeded the license allowed him by Cana, the pattern of his interests was beginning to weigh heavily against his assumed pose as an academic syncretist.

Now that the Commandos had the information they required,

Bron was free to try to mold for himself a pattern of survival if he could. Since he was sitting at what was calculated to be the losing end of one of the biggest projected space battles ever, his course was not easy to see.

The subspace alert broke his deliberations and forced him to look for safety straps. Most of the positions were duty points, soon to be occupied by crewmen. He found a spare harness near the communications room and thrust his arms into it. So tightly did the Destroyers cut their pre-jump schedule that many of the crewmen made their positions with equally little time to spare. Then the ship jumped. The Destroyers obviously believed in making concessions neither to ship nor men when dealing with subspace. They slammed into it at full power, hard, fast and straight. Thirty-three seconds of gut-tearing, bone-straining agony, during which their craft was slipped through the light-barrier to be hurled at superluminal velocities across the galaxy.

Bron knew from subspace theory what his conscious mind refused to accept—that by a process of involution the ship had in reality disappeared from the space-time continuum entirely and now actually moved between the webs of its own ersatz galaxy in the subspace cavity deep within its own guts. Stories still survived of spacemen who claimed to have

seen the copper bars straddling the stars at the end of a subspace jump. Bron was not certain about this, but he did know that technicians caught in the subspace cavity during the jump had observed the ionization trail of their own ship speeding from web to web. Those of them, that is, who managed to recover from the shock.

THE ship dropped into the quiescent phase of the jump and the tearing pressures eased. The heavy thunder of the grav drive was replaced by the eerie song of the fantastically delicate subspace drive. Bron unbuckled the harness and let it drop, finding suddenly that he was left with nothing specific to do but look for the one-in-ten-billion chance of survival.

His situation was unenviable. He could do nothing that might endanger the success of the Commandos—within these slim confines he was entitled to seek his own salvation. Yet who was he? Who was this parcel of human flesh upon whom so much seemed to have depended?

In the quietness of his own cabinspace the question suddenly seemed of great importance to him.

“Jaycee, now tell me about me. What name did I have other than Bron?”

None, Jaycee responded with quiet malice. *You were found in a*

street market of Anhatine on Bela-six by a Terran trade delegation. They had chartered a scudder and its descent blasted apart a pile of garbage. You were underneath, four weeks old. I wish to God they'd left you there, but they picked you up because they were Terrans and therefore soft and squeamish about the destruction of young life. They took you with them to the spaceport from which they were due to travel offworld. Neither the police nor the customs were interested, so you were shipped to Terra, registered as a demonstration animal. How you got the name nobody knows, but it was probably the coded customs stamp on your livestock export documents. In a way it seems rather appropriate.

"You aren't lying to me are you, Jaycee?"

No, it's all on file. On Terra your presence proved embarrassin' to the dispersin' delegation. You were dumped in a para-military orphanage run by a Dr. Harvestine. Harvestine was a pathological bully, but apparently a good teacher. By the age of seven you learned enough of the brutal arts to break the doctor's neck in unarmed combat. Only the Commando school seemed to offer the type of curriculum to which you'd been accustomed, so the courts sent you there.

For the next fifteen years you took everythin' in the way of train-

in' the commandos could fling at you. Both academically and militarily you persisted in comin' out on top. From weaponry through combat to higher mathematics you thrived on everythin' that was offered. But with one unalterable characteristic—a capacity for chaos.

"Chaos?"

Yes, Bron. The ability to play a system against itself until it breaks down and disintegrates. Then, when everyone is runnin' in circles, guess who moves through the ruins engaged in furtherin' his own ends?

"And that's me?"

That's you, Bron. Everythin' about you is chaos. Your personal life is chaos and the same thing happens to most of those with whom you get involved. You breed chaos and when the mess is thick enough you move in, pickin' the bits you think you want and then discardin' them when they don't provide whatever it is you're searchin' for. You do this with people as well as things—and without regard for the consequences.

"Tell me, Jaycee, did we ever meet?"

That's classified information, Bron. I can't answer you that.

"Damn you, I'll ask Doc."

You'll get the same answer from anyone. Our relationship is on a psychologically balanced basis and you or nothin' is goin' to upset the balance.

"Don't compute on that, Jaycee. If ever I make Terra again it'll take more than the Stellar Com-mando to keep me from the ob-jective I have in mind right now."

The door opened abruptly and two armed crewmen gestured him out into the corridor.

"Bron 'altern, Cana wants to see you. Come."

This time there was no attempt at respect. A curt order and a movement with a handgun were more an indication of an arrest than a request for company. Bron shrugged and turned as directed.

"This looks like the end, Jay-cee," he said subvocally.

I'm bringing Doc on-line. If there's anythin' we can do . . .

"You know the only damn thing you can do is kill me to stop my breaking under torture."

THE detail halted before Cana's door, motioned for him to enter, then took stations outside, handguns ready. Cana was seated at his desk, a solitary figure deep in thought, chin in hands, elbows resting on a plane of polished wood.

"Sit down, Syncretist," he said. "I take it you've concluded your investigations on the origin of the missile."

Bron relaxed slightly. "I have."

"Having checked a reprint of your calculations, I can assure you that your answers coincide exactly

with our own. The fact that you programed the computer using a weaponry format rather than the classical software has not escaped my notice. One wonders just how far syncretism extends."

His eyes looked into Bron's with a questing comprehension that left Bron feeling weak. A slight smile surfaced on Cana's lips.

"You're a man of many talents, Syncretist. And I don't suppose we've seen all of them yet. But then, I should have expected nothing else from you."

"I don't understand."

Cana raised his eyebrows sagely. "I take it you've already decided where the missile came from."

"Of course. It originated either from a location in Messier Thirty-one some seven hundred million years ago or from a carrier somewhere in the void only a few hours before impact. From the location of your ring of ships at rendezvous, it is obvious that you know that a missile was going down on Onaris and knew in advance the precise details of its trajectory."

"The implication being that the weapon carrier was mine and that the destruction of Onaris was an entertainment rigged mainly for your benefit?"

"You read me correctly," said Bron. Knowing both the nearness and the inevitability of death gave him a curiously fatalistic courage.

"You're no fool, Syncretist," said Cana, "and you're no megalomaniac either. Ask yourself why the hell I would go to such lengths just to amuse you. The answer is that I wouldn't. To reach the truth of the situation it is necessary to make an inversion. We didn't anticipate that missile as much as it anticipated us. And its origin was in Messier Thirty-one."

"That I decline to believe. Have you tried to examine the implications?"

"Yes." Cana maintained his intellectual calm. "The implications are simply that seven hundred million years ago someone or something in Andromeda foresaw the precise details of our raid on Onaris and our acquisition of you and took steps calculated to prevent our meeting. So fantastic were their calculations that they were positionally exact and only about sixteen hours late in time. It's the same story almost wherever we go—but the time margin is becoming smaller. On present estimates we shall be able to get away with only four more raids. If we attempt a fifth, we shall still be there when the hellburner arrives."

"Suppose you leave earlier—or change your destination?"

"It makes no difference. It is the action we finally perform, not the decisions leading up to it, that is critical. If we plan a raid and abort our intention at the last

instant, no missile appears. Sometime nobody but myself has known of the intention to abort a raid—yet seven hundred million years ago that whim of mine was anticipated. If we plan a target, then switch to an alternative, it is to the alternative that the missile is directed—was directed—somewhere about the time that the first sparks of life were being struck in the Terran primitive soup. It's like the ancient concept of fate, fixed and immutable, that waits for you no matter where you run."

"Insanity!" For a moment the Haltern synthesis flared.

"Not insanity, Syncretist Bron Haltern—or whoever you may be." Cana's gaze was shrewd and unruffled. "Rather a matter of cause and effect. Initially we were primarily engaged in acquiring slaves, but among our intake was an inevitable percentage of indigenous intelligentsia. These we employed on high-level tasks. Sometimes a missile followed these raids and sometimes it did not. Our computers threw up the curious correlation between our acquisition of certain specialist technocrats and the destruction of the world from which they had been taken. These peculiarly fatalistic individuals all had knowledge and potential in one field of advanced cosmology—that of the patterns of chaos. Which brings us directly to you."

"In what way?"

"Seeing that our opportunities were running short, we made it our deliberate policy when raiding to acquire the best chaos men in the galaxy. Your reputation as an authority on the patterns of chaos ranks indisputably the highest and made you a natural candidate both for us and for the arrival of the missile where and when it fell. Only—"

"Only what?"

"The missiles normally consist of three cylinders at most. For you they sent seven. From a distance of better than six hundred thousand parsecs and seven hundred million years in time they must have held your achievements, actual or potential, in very high regard. What sort of things are you going to do, Syncretist, to realize that promise?"

VIII

A DISTURBANCE outside the door forestalled any answer Bron might have made. Daiquist's voice could be heard raised in angry argument with the guard detail. Cana keyed a switch on his desk and the door swung open.

"Come in, Martin. They had their instructions not to let us be disturbed."

Daiquist strode into the room, followed by two junior officers. His face was red with fury.

"You've got that damned syncretist here—"

"Certainly." Cana regarded his fuming lieutenant speculatively. "What's on your mind, Martin?"

"He is. I thought he was a spy and now I'm certain of it."

Cana remained utterly calm. "You could be right, Martin. I, too, have my suspicions. But they may not be relevant. It's no accident that seven cylinders went down on Onaris. Spy or not, he's certainly a prime chaos catalyst."

"To hell with Catalysis. I don't trust him. He's too damned clever. He was snooping around in the subspace cavity just before the jump."

Cana stiffened. "Can you explain that, Syncretist?"

"I was interested in how you programed for the jump. I have some subspace theories of my own."

"I have other theories," said Daiquist, "and one of them is that you're not Haltern. It would take me only a half-hour in the interrogation room to get the truth from you."

"No." Cana's voice was sharp. "All the signs so far are that we've acquired in him a key piece of this entropy puzzle. Haltern or not, it doesn't matter much. He appears to have the potential to fill whatever catalytic role the patterns of chaos have already set. To put it bluntly, a large part of the future threatens to ride on his shoul-

ders—and the future would be better supported on a fit back than on a cripple's."

"Then confine him to where he can't get into any mischief—or I can't be held responsible for your safety or the safety of this ship."

"Very well." Cana came to a sudden decision. "Break the jump, Martin, and put him aboard the nearest corvette."

Daiquist nodded his acceptance. "I've an even better idea. Let me put him on the *Tantalus*—and I'll go with him. I'd be interested in seeing his reactions."

Cana considered some hidden implication in the proposal, nodded his approval. "I doubt you're right, Martin, but there's a slight chance we might learn something. There has to be something very special about a man whose murder was considered so essential seven million centuries ago."

Daiquist nodded curtly to his aides. "Take the Syncretist and lock him up. One of you is to stay with him at all times. I'll have the jump halted. We should be ready to make transfer within the hour."

BRON was escorted to an empty cabin and locked in with one of the aides. He lay back on the bunk and stared up at the ceiling.

"Jaycee."

Don't talk to me, you pitiful cretin!

"What the hell's eating you?"

If they discover now who you are it could ruin the whole exercise.

"Spool the sermons, Jaycee. I need Ander, quick."

You need poisonin', quick. Ander's not here but I'll try to contact him. What's the readout?

"I want a fast replay on this patterns of chaos business. Maybe Ander can make some sense out of it, but I'm damned if I can. Was Doc in on that last sequence?"

On-line the whole way. When he'd finished his fingernails he started on mine.

"Charming. What's the general impression?"

As we read it, the only thing that's keepin' you alive is Cana's fear of somethin' else. God alone knows what that somethin' is, but it either exists or Cana's the biggest nut of the millennium.

"Cana's no nut. He's got a pretty powerful brain, but he's well balanced. He's at war with something and it isn't just the Ter-ran Federation. So who or what the hell is it, Jaycee?"

Sometimes I wonder if Ananias knows. He makes like a seasick dog at any mention of missiles from Messier 31. He won't hear of the idea.

"I suspect there's quite a lot that Ananias knows and won't tell. Is he there now?"

No. He ran yapping to Genstaff with the coordinates instead of letting them go on standard transmission. I think he has ideas

of taking you over personally. He hasn't been around long enough to know that workin' with you isn't the sort of job you volunteer for.

"I could almost wish he'd try. Any idea what kind of vessel the *Tantalus* might be? It seems to have some special significance for Daiquist and Cana."

Computer check through Intelligence records of known Destroyer craft shows no listin'. The only Tantalus that shows up anywhere for the last fifty years is the Terran Army's deep-space laboratory ship that got lost somehow a few years back on an experimental voyage beyond the Rim.

"See if you can get a bit of detail on it. Might throw up something useful. I'd like a word with Doc if he's still there."

Engaged, Bron. Doc Veeder's precise voice fell in soft contrast to Jaycee's edged tones. *What's the readout?*

"Assuming for the moment that Cana is right about the seven cylinders on Onaris being intended specifically for Haltern, don't forget that the man to whom they should have been addressed was Ander, not me. I don't know what a chaos catalyst is—but if Cana isn't mad or lying you could be sitting on some potential time-bomb-type events centered on Ander. I just thought the fact might have slipped your notice."

It did. We were concentrating so

much on your end that we had forgotten about the substitution. We're not yet convinced about this chaos business, but it might be as well to play safe. Any suggestions?

"Yes. Keep him well guarded and hold him available for communication over the transfer link. As I see it, something big is going to happen and he may well be the one person who can make sense of it all. I suggest you put a computer on full-time coincidence checking and feed every atom of even seemingly relevant data to it. This whole business has a decidedly off-beat feeling about it."

I don't follow you, but I'll do as you suggest. I'll stay on-line for a bit in case anything new develops.

BRON relaxed and closed his eyes. The aide guarding him toyed with his drawn sidearm at the table. Both men waited in silence for the end of the jump and for the next round of action to begin.

Bron, his questing mind searching for some stimulus to bridge the hiatus, pushed his perception past the star static and the carrier hiss of the link circuit intruding from under his awareness threshold—and found something else. Something that, though he knew its shadows, he was completely unprepared to face—the goose-mutter, the phantom sound of liquid

geese—but louder this time, nearer, and with an articulate and angry urgency that chilled him to the marrow. His mind's initial reaction was to recoil in shock, but his analytical faculty forced him to seek some explanation.

A glutinous, viscous, thixotropic foam of a sound, its incomprehensible yet meaningful babble struck him with all the implied urgency and horror of an unalterable disaster bearing down. Again his imagination fled, life-supported on an intangible raft, down the waters of some subterranean Styx, gathering shadows where there was no light and gathering sounds, the origin of which he dared not imagine. He felt the motion of the wash rippling gently at the breaking of some slight turbulence and sensed his own slow and measureless progression down the tunnel toward its end. What end? What lay around the dark bends of that terrible river? Fantasies more terrible than death reared up out of the shades of his imagination.

His unashamed scream coincided exactly with the shrill of the break-jump alert and a few seconds later the liquid geese were washed away in the intricate agonies of the end of the subspace jump.

LEANING past his escort as the tender left its monstrous parent's womb, Bron grasped the Hockung lens and brought it to

bear on their destination. Space-worthy though she must be, the *Tantalus* bore none of the look of bronzed efficiency that characterized Destroyer ships. Rather she looked to have been dipped in whitewash that had lost its adhesion and bulged and sagged and stripped. Nor had she the trim outline of a naval craft, being squat and ugly and with a hindpart made hideous and complex by the devices of a dozen different drive systems. If her hull had once had her name emblazoned on it, the legend had long since succumbed to the attrition of space and to corrosion and pitting.

"Terran," said Bron subvocally, returning the Hockung lens to the navigator of the tender.

Check, Bron. Looks as though it is the Army's long-lost deep-space lab. There's a print from Records just comin' through, so we can run a comparison to see if she's been modified as a hellburner carrier.

"I doubt it. Even if she were capable of throwing a device like that I don't see how she could have achieved an accuracy of plus or minus a meter over that sort of range."

Somebody did.

From a closer view it was possible to see the effect of the ravages to which the hull of the *Tantalus* must at some time have been subjected. Huge pits and whorls had penetrated an arm's thickness into the metal in a man-

ner suggesting she had been pressure-hosed with acid. In places the very metal itself seemed to have delaminated and the random curls and blisters of the outer skin in the process of detachment lent the ship a diseased and infected air. However, her docking equipment functioned efficiently enough and Bron, followed by Daiquist and the two aides, stepped through the lock into the warm, trim and quaintly outdated interior.

Bron stopped suddenly, his scalp prickling.

What is it, Bron?

“Something’s awfully wrong here. This ship has a very queer feel about it.”

What kind of wrong?

“The weird kind. I can’t define it. Has the *Tantalus* been modified?”

Not as far as we can tell. But she did carry conventional weaponry—as do all Army ships—and these include Terran hellburners of the Nemesis class.

“The burner that went down on Onaris would have made the punch of a Nemesis feel like a love bite. Anyway, there was nothing human in the design of that damn thing.”

Meanin’ that you’re acceptin’ Cana’s point of view that the Onaris burner was both aged and alien. She was coldly critical. Why the hell don’t you—

“Spool it, Jaycee! I’m not accepting anything. I’m saying that

if what I smell is right we’re so far out of our depth that even if we sank at twenty-G acceleration we’d never touch bottom.”

How do you compute that?

“I’ve just realized what’s wrong with this ship. It isn’t the *Tantalus* at all—at least, not the one that was built. It’s a bloody mirror image.”

Make a little sense, Bron.

“Look at the dials and gauges. Look at the labels. Everything. Lateral inversion complete to the last detail. This isn’t a Cana stage trick, Jaycee. This is real.”

Bron became aware suddenly that Daiquist was watching him with a fixed concentration that was actively hostile. Jaycee picked up the same point simultaneously.

Watch out for Daiquist, Bron. I think he’s trying to use the Tantalus to prove you’re a Terran agent. Show any familiarity and you’ll betray yourself.

“Have the coordinates gone out on general transmission yet?”

Don’t know. Ananias isn’t back. Why?

“As soon as the Terran task force is under way and the plan can’t be jeopardized I may have to kill Daiquist.”

JAYCEE started to speak but quieted suddenly to allow Bron to concentrate as Daiquist turned back toward him.

"You're looking puzzled, Bron Haltern."

"This ship—it's not Destroyer manufacture?"

"No. Terran. A bit of cosmic flotsam we picked out of the void. It has its uses."

"Do Terrans always read meters backwards?"

"No. That's just a fragment of chaos. As a specialist in the field, it shouldn't perturb you unduly."

Bron broke away from the encounter with a shrug. Nothing in his own training or in the Haltern synthesis had prepared him with an answer. Daiquist's interest in pursuing the subject was broken as the subspace alert signaled the resumption of the jump. Unlike the Destroyer vessel, the *Tantalus* slipped into subspace with a mere shiver which was so soft as to be almost sensuous.

As they moved into the quiet phase Bron began to get his bearings and started walking apparently aimlessly through the ship's main installations. He hoped an outward display of academic interest was in keeping with his pose as a syncretist. Inwardly he was looking for vital threads that might aid his own survival.

The *Tantalus* was a small vessel with perhaps only a hundredth part of the displacement of one of Cana's fleshholding spatial dreadnoughts. Since it was only lightly armed and, from its condition,

scarcely capable of withstanding an attack, it occurred to Bron to wonder exactly what its function was in the fleet. Its laboratory facilities were well maintained and in use and it was crewed by an unusually high proportion of high-ranking technicians and even a few civilians. Their interest in his arrival ran in strong contrast to Daiquist's dour suspicion.

Daiquist shadowed him silently for a while, then approached and took his arm. "Come, I want you to meet the captain—Academician Laaris."

The captain was as untypical of Destroyer personnel as the *Tantalus* was of their fleet. His chartroom was a mess of improvised instrumentation, among which he moved with the agility of a sprite. He was small and dark and his bright eyes glinted with shrewdness. With only a formal acknowledgment of Daiquist, he forcibly crossed the veins of his wrist with Bron's in the Destroyer familiar greeting.

"Mastership 'altern, for you I die!"

Bron's surprise at the greeting must have been reflected in his face, for Laaris smiled broadly.

"No, we 'ave not met, but I know you well. Everyone who works on chaos knows you. The paper you gave at Maroc on Priam is almost our standard tex'."

Bron could not resist the question. "Is that what you're doing on

the *Tantalus*—research into the patterns of chaos?”

“But of course.” For a moment Laaris looked perplexed. “Is that no’ why you come?”

“I don’t think so.” Bron glanced at Daiquist and waited to hear the colonel’s explanation.

“Haltern’s not here of his own free will. He’s a prisoner and, we suspect, a spy. For that reason he’s under open arrest. Watch him, Captain. He’s a dangerous man.”

Laaris’s face was crossed by a bafflement which was rapidly replaced by a smile of relief. “The science of chaos is intergalactic. It is you, Colonel, who fail to comprehend the liaison between scientific minds. Come ’altern, I will find you cabinspace. Later we can talk chaos.”

IN HIS new cabinspace, away from Daiquist’s prying eyes, Bron’s contact was urgent.

“Jaycee, for God’s sake—haven’t you got Ander yet? Either I talk chaos with an expert or Daiquist is set to take me apart.”

Ander’s been located, Bron. We should have him soon.

“Are the coordinates on transmission yet?”

Ananias has just come in. I’ll ask—

“Put him on-line. Things are becoming critical fast ”

I don’t trust Ananias near the control board.

“Damn you, Jaycee. Do as you’re told.”

Well spoken, Bron. Ananias’s insinuating tones took over. *Glad to find I’m not the only one who has trouble with Honey-bitch.*

“Spool it, Ananias. Did the coordinates go out yet?”

That’s GenStaff’s business.

“And mine. I’m going to have to make a move soon. If I move too fast the whole Destroyer pack will scatter like a shoal of startled fish.”

You overestimate yourself, little soldier.

“No, but I underestimated you. Look around me, Ananias. Do you see where I am?”

On another vessel. Terran, I would guess.

“You’re not guessing, Ananias. You damn well know. The Lab-Ship *Tantalus*, no less.”

Is that supposed to mean something to me?

“As I begin to recall it, yes. Are you listening, Jaycee?”

On-line, Bron.

“This amnesia seems to be catching. Run a replay of the crewlist of the last recorded voyage of the *Tantalus*.”

Don’t bother. Ananias’s voice was swift and angry. *I’ll admit it lists me. But you’ve gone over the edge, Bron. I’m warning you to stay quiet. Don’t be a damn fool.*

“Listen, Ananias, from now on this operation’s going to be handled my way. You’re going to

cooperate, because you haven't the character to stand the stigma of being branded as a freak."

The sharp noise of a scuffle penetrated the transfer link. Then somebody screamed with pain.

It's all right, Bron. I'm holdin' him. He tried to hit the murder button, so I dislocated both his thumbs. Give us the readout. We'd better have the information this end so we can use it in case anythin' happens to you.

"Yes, you had better. Colonel Ananias, as he was then, commanded the *Tantalus* on the voyage during which she was lost. As sole survivor he made Terra two years later on a stellar tramp and claimed he was beaten out of space by a Destroyer task force."

It was the truth. Ananias's pained protest carried distinctly.

"I doubt it," said Bron. "The damage done to this ship was never done by any Destroyer. It's my guess you fled out of the void when something unnamable overtook you. I think you abandoned the *Tantalus* somewhere to make the story hold, then transhipped to Terra on a tramp. I hate to think what became of the crew."

You don't have a single shred of proof.

"I don't, but I think you have. Jaycee, you've probably slept with him. Was there nothing unusual?"

He's a Godlost weaklin'—but that's nothin' unusual. Jaycee's

contempt was as sharp as a whip-lash. *What you meanin', Bron?*

"Feel under his shirt, Jaycee. If my idea is true you'll find his heart on the right side instead of on the left—where it was when he was born. I think he became inverted at the same time as the *Tantalus*. And whatever caused the phenomenon had nothing to do with a human agency."

IX

BRON, *I've got Ander for you.*
"Put him on-line, Jaycee. He's got about five minutes to bring me up to mastership standard in the theory and practice of chaos."

Ander speaking. I do what I can. But I can only give you barest outline.

"Reading you, Ander. That will have to suffice. What is this thing called chaos?"

The whole spectrum of cause and effect, from the subnuclear to the galactic, considered not as connected incidents but from an entropic standpoint—as a random dynamic fluid.

"I can see the concept, but not how you can use it."

I come to that. First let me establish the importance of time as a factor. It's a fundamental tenet of the universe that entropy increases with time. The only exception is intervention by some form of intelligence, such as Man's, which can locally de-

crease entropy or accelerate its rate several orders above the norm.

A knock at the door signaled for Bron's attention. Shrugging his gown to the floor, he went to the door and opened it.

"Mastership 'altern, Academician Laaris would be please' for you to join 'im urgently."

"As soon as I have finished my ablutions I shall be ready." Bron freely amplified the weak suggestions of Haltern intolerance. "Tell him I come soon."

Securing the latch, he returned to the watcher in his head.

"Carry on, Ander. I read the words so far."

Don't need them, learn them. They're important. All chaos calculations are made against quantized time and can be either prognostic or retrospective according to the sign. They can be used to predict the future or to examine the elements of the past which have had a significant bearing on the present.

"But having randomized all your factors, I don't see how it's possible to determine anything by mathematical treatment."

Imagine a container of fluid.

"Your entropic system—molecules in random motion?"

Exactly. You should have been scholar, not soldier. The pressure of the fluid is due to the random collision and rebounding of molecules with each other and

with the walls of the container. In the hypothetical fluid we call chaos the molecules are replaced by events and the events interact with each other just as do molecules.

"Keep going, Ander. I'm still with you. But I'm fast running out of time." Bron found the shower and ran it noisily. "Daiquist'll come looking if I don't show up soon. I wonder what the panic is."

I must lead you through this part carefully. Not understanding it could be fatal for you. Suppose your container initially had inhomogeneous areas of fluid at different temperatures?

"They would mix by diffusion. The energy of the system would remain the same, but the entropy would slowly increase."

Thus you have a fair analogue of the condition of the universe.

ANOTHER knock, heavier than the last, came at the door. This time Bron went stark naked and trailing water in his wake. Daiquist stood outside, stern, suspicious and angry. He seemed somewhat mollified to find that the promised ablutions were actually taking place.

"You're taking a damn long time, Syncretist. You're needed in the chartroom."

"The dust of the Destroyers is uncommonly hard to remove." Bron turned his back on the col-

onel and stalked back to the shower. Daiquist came into the room and stood impatiently.

"I'll wait until you're finished. You'd better hurry. Laaris needs you."

"Ander, this is going to be tricky. Keep talking." Subvocally.

If you can grasp the next point we're nearly there. In your container, what would be the effect of heating or cooling small areas of the fluid?

"Obviously local accelerations or decelerations of entropy." Bron switched on the driers in the cubicle.

And in our chaos fluid, what could be the only cause of the chaos analogue? I've already given you the answer once.

"You mean intervention by some form of intelligence such as Man's?"

Precisely, Bron. Home and dry. Events precipitated by intelligent intervention invariably lead to alterations in local entropy and these can usually be detected by entropic analysis. Going back to our analogy, this corresponds to local heating or cooling of points in the fluid. If it occurred in an actual fluid it could be detected in a number of ways according to its sign and intensity—optically, as a local change in diffraction; audibly, perhaps as an explosion or a cavitation implosion; physical-

ly, as a shock-wave or pressure difference.

"And in your theoretical chaos fluid?"

An effect similar to that of a spherical shock-wave spreading out from the point of origin—continuously growing, continuously falling in intensity. It is observable only as minute ripples in the long tides of entropy. It's the inter-ripple and interference of these entropic wave fronts that we call the patterns of chaos.

Daiquist was pacing the floor angrily. He was obviously unused to being disobeyed and was distressed by an unstated urgency. Bron drew on his undergarments and then his gown, carefully subvocalizing so that his attentive antagonist should receive no sign.

"But how do you detect the ripples?"

Detection is the least of the problems. A detector can be as simple as an iron diaphragm in an oxygen atmosphere. Given a measuring system sensitive enough to show the acceleration or deceleration of its natural entropic change, it's fairly easy to see the ripples pass. But the mathematical analysis of these ripples into meaningful points of time and place is difficult.

Bron creased his brow. His conversation must cease in seconds and he would then need to adopt the pose of an expert. But he dared

delay no longer. Daiquist drew his firearm and gestured for Bron to precede him along the corridor. Yet Bron's questions still needed urgent answer.

"Stay on-line, Ander. You spoke of cause and effect. I can see how you can locate the incident that was the cause of something, but what about locating the effect?"

The one is only the converse of the other. There is no difference between them except for the direction in which you read time. You'll be familiar with that concept from your studies of the fundamental particles. Both cause and effect make detectable entropic 'sparks' that become the centers of expanding shock spheres. If you can analyze enough of the sphere to be able to determine the radius of its curvature and its intensity you can locate the position of a cause or resultant both in space and time by extrapolating along the geocentric axis. But mark this: the significant thing about a linked cause and resultant is that those two correlated events, and those alone, will have coincident axes. If you can locate the one you can usually find the other.

IN THE chartroom the impish Academician Laaris had somehow lost his vivacity under a cloud of concern. Even his technicians, who had formerly shared

his interest in the syncretist's arrival, were now too dumbly attentive to their boards to mark Bron's entrance. Instead of an air of academic interest, the atmosphere was charged with disbelief and panic.

"'altern!" Laaris almost split himself with relief on seeing Bron. "'altern, this you 'ave to explain." He seized a ten-meter length of chart strip and tore it from the recorder. "Such a chaos wave as this we 'ave never seen before."

Bron took the chart strip and began to explore along it. The multicolored lines started with slow excursions, gentle ripples on an abstract shore, part of the ever-pulsing patterns of chaos. Then a red trace broke away from its fellows, crossed the logarithmic scale to near infinity and was apparently arrested even there only by the inability of the luckless instrument to follow it farther. For several meters the errant trace fought the stop-post on the meter. Then, even more abruptly than it had arisen, the trace fell straight across the graph and disappeared below absolute zero.

Somebody said, *Holy Moses!* deep inside Bron's head.

Subvocally: "Did you see that, Ander? I need answers fast."

I don't have any. I need more information about the computer scan to be certain.

Laaris was upon Bron, almost

dancing with impatience to hear the sage explain. The Haltern synthesis stood mute.

"Academician Laaris, can you first define the parameters of your computer scan?"

"Scan? Scan?" The little man almost hopped with despair. "You don' need computer scan to answer tha'."

"You forget," said Bron Haltern coldly, "that your information is presented in Destroyer conventions, not mine."

"But always," expostulated Laaris, "the red line is your reference baseline. 'Ere it is the line representing this ship as a reference point. Where 'as it gone? Where went my ship?"

Ander said, *Have it now, Bron*, and began to pour information into his head. Bron considered the import of the words as he re-read the last appearance of the red line.

"You don't need me to tell you," he said at last to Laaris. "You know the answer as well as I. We have just entered a chaos-effect shock sphere and are proceeding directly down a coincident axis to the point of origin—which will be this vessel's complete annihilation."

Laaris looked up gratefully. "You, too, 'altern, say the same as I. I thought I was mistaken. Because I don' see how i's possible for the vessel itself to be on coinciden' axis unless somethin'

aboard was also the cause of the annihilation."

"Curious you should say that," said Daiquist, picking up his gun and looking at Bron meaningly. "Because that's the one point about which I'd never had a doubt."

DAIQUIST motioned to a couple of the crew. "Look after the syncretist while I get this sorted out." He turned back to Laaris. "Am I to understand the chaos evidence means this ship is set for destruction?"

"There's no doubt abou' i'."

"From what cause?"

"That I can' say. The causal wave 'as not shown up. Perhaps if we reset the scan—"

"There's no time. I've seen how accurate chaos evidence can be." He waved an arm in Bron's direction. "Lock him up somewhere."

Bron submitted, reading the underlying perplexity on Laaris's brow and equating it with his own.

"Ander, tape me in, will you. We've seen an effect wave, but Laaris says the causal wave has not shown up. Can you have an effect without a cause? If not, why haven't we seen the wave?"

We will, Bron.

"What do you mean?"

It had me stumped at first. Laaris had a prognostic scan set up on his computer and was reading

a future event, the cause of which is missing. It's a highly unique situation even in chaos work, but it can happen. The simple answer is that the cause hasn't yet happened.

"But neither has the effect actually happened yet," protested Bron.

You're not thinking good chaos, Bron. The destruction of the Tantalus is an event already fixed in the entropic patterns. It's impossible to alter that fact. But the means by which you are going to achieve its destruction have not yet been determined and therefore have as yet no precise point in the patterns.

"The means by which I am going to achieve its destruction?"

Yes, Bron. You're the other end of the coincident axes. You're the catalyst that is going to initiate the entropic change.

"Not the Stellar fleet, then?"

No, or there would already have been a wavefront corresponding to their decision to attack. In fact, from the absence of extraneous lines I'd say the Stellar Commando fleet was not even going to get there.

Jaycee on-line, Bron. I just caught the trailing end of that conversation and it computes straight. The Commando raid has been aborted. Disappointment weighted her every word.

Bron was staggered. "You have to be joking—"

The coordinates turned out to be Brick's World—an early settlement planet colonized during the Great Exodus. It's a farm planet, lacking mineral resources. Definitely not a Destroyer baseworld. GenStaff reckons the Destroyers use it for reprovisioning, but if they do they don't stay for more than a few hours. By the time we could get a fleet there the Destroyers could be anywhere in space.

"So the mission's a failure?"

We're going to keep riding with you in case something shows up, but officially the game is over.

"I'm glad you said that, Jaycee. I'm rapidly coming to the point where I'm going to have to take the initiative myself. Is Ananias around?"

He's down with the medic, havin' his thumbs put back in joint. Don't think he'll be doin' any maulin' for a few days. Doc's still fightin' GenStaff over him, but it looks as if Ananias might win.

"I haven't finished with General Ananias. There's a check you can run for me, Jaycee. Find out how much of the equipment we've seen on the *Tantalus* is Terran original. Ananias used to command *Tantalus*, so I want to know how much access he might have had to chaos information."

Which channel you readin', Bron?

"I want to know how much of

this project he could possibly have foreseen, given the right know-how."

Engaged. I'll give you the read-out as soon as it comes in. I could rather enjoy reducin' that bastard to a jelly.

THE break-jump alert sounded shrilly. The *Tantalus* slipped out of subspace almost imperceptibly, in contrast to the subtle agonies of the Destroyer maneuver. Bron waited impatiently for release from the cabin in which he had been locked—he heard indications of the ship's being abandoned. At last the proximity lock responded to an unseen hand. Daiquist stood at the door.

"You have Academician Laaris to thank for this. I'd have been content to let you rot. But he was so impressed by your interpretation of his chaos graphs that he insists that you have the freedom of the facilities which he is unable to employ."

"Unable?"

"On chaos evidence, this ship is set for destruction. We've taken Laaris and his crew to another ship for safety. You'll remain aboard with a skeleton crew who will place the *Tantalus* into a safe orbit. If the *Tantalus* survives that long you'll be fetched down and held until Cana decides

what to do with you. The skeleton crew has instructions to shoot you if you attempt to interfere with the running of the ship. Apart from that you're free to make your own way to hell."

Thoughtfully Bron watched the last tender leave. The only men who were left aboard the *Tantalus* were hard-lipped Destroyer shipmen, clannish technological animals, molded in the inbuilt ruthlessness that characterized Destroyer operations. Bron ignored them and made for the computer terminal, his mind beginning to play with the several possibilities the situation presented. Nevertheless he waited until the *Tantalus* was actually back in subspace before he dared to make any kind of move.

Actuating a programer, he began to key figures into the input, working by touch on the laterally inverted keyboard and deliberately avoiding watching either his own fingers or the acceptance readout.

What you doin', Bron?

"Exercising my fingers. There are a few throats I've got to keep them in trim for."

Her voice grew taut. *Let me see those figures for the recorders. You know the rules.*

"Spool it, Jaycee. You had your run and it got us nowhere. Now jet off while I do it my way."

Are you defyin' me, Bron? Her voice was archly incredulous.

"I don't give a damn about you. Go ply your bitchiness where it's appreciated."

I said let me see those figures, Bron. I don't want to have to use the punishment circuits on you.

"Don't fool yourself. You'd just love the opportunity. It's the justification you're lacking."

She did not respond.

The program completed, he activated the transfer of the data to the computing complex unexamined, not wishing to expose his position by scanning the tape for the benefit of Jaycee's recorders.

I'm warnin' you, Bron. Perhaps you've forgotten what sort of bite I can apply.

"Call Doc, Jaycee," said Bron wearily. "If I've forgotten, he'll no doubt remind me."

He was now watching the intermediate readouts as the computer fled through the calculations. Over the transfer link he could hear Jaycee's voice raised in vitriolic protest. Then the voice of Doc came clear upon the air.

What the hell's this about, Bron. You should know better than to cross Jaycee. He sounded indefinitely tired.

"Turn off the recorders, Doc, and listen. What kind of game is Ananias playing?"

You're not alone in wondering. He must have a personal deity on the General Staff to allow him to get away with what he does. In an-

swer to your earlier question, it seems he did have access to a lot of chaos equipment.

"Was it he who suggested the Destroyers should be allowed to raid Onaris unmolested?"

Yes—but it was in accordance with the outline plan.

Bron watched the readouts with growing comprehension. "Was the Onaris hellburner in the plan too?"

No. That was something we hadn't foreseen. We wouldn't have let the Destroyers hit Onaris if we'd known about that.

"You wouldn't, perhaps. But what about Ananias?"

Naturally not—

"There's nothing natural about it—or him." Bron saw the "calculation complete" signal come up on the board and activated the printout.

"I have a theory that Ananias knew that hellburner was going to go down on Onaris and I think he knew it a long time ago. I think he knew it as surely as he knew where and when the Destroyers were going to pick me up. Don't underestimate Ananias. He knew in advance that the Destroyers' subspace coordinates would not ever lead to Brick's World."

But they did.

"No, Doc, they didn't. Ananias double-crossed you."

TO BE CONTINUED



Frank



THE CAST-IRON RAT

HARRY HARRISON

*The Stainless Steel Rat
could do few things right—
but nothing at all wrong!*

I carried an attache case filled with the usual things—grenades, gas bombs, explosives, nose filters, a gun or two—just the normal tools of the trade. My back was straight, my shoulders square and I entered the paymaster's office in a most martial manner if only to do the uniform justice—a spanking new goldstriped and beribboned uniform of a commander in the United States Navy.

"Good morning," I snapped briskly, closing the door behind me and locking it at the same time, swiftly and silently, with the tool concealed in my hand.

"Yes, sir."

The grizzled chief petty officer behind the desk spoke politely enough but it was obvious that his attention was really upon his work, the papers piled neatly upon his desk, and strange officers simply had to wait their turn. Just as sergeants do in all armies, the chiefs run the navies. Sailors hurried about on naval financial matters and through a doorway opposite I had a view of the gape-mouthed gray form of a government issue safe. Lovely. I put my case on the chief's desk and snapped it open.

"I read about it in the newspaper," I said. "About how the mili-

tary always rounds its figures upward to the next million or billion dollars when asking for appropriations. I admire that."

"Aye aye, sir," the chief muttered, his fingers punishing the comptometer keys, uninterested in either my reading ability or in any comments from the press.

"I thought you would be interested. But that gave me the idea. Share the wealth. With such liberality there should be plenty to spare for me. That is why I am going to shoot you, Chief."

That got his attention. I waited until the eyewidening and jawgaping reached their maximum, then pulled the trigger on the long barreled pistol. It went *shoof* and thudded in my hand and the chief grunted and slipped from sight behind the desk. All of this had taken but a moment and the others in the office were just becoming aware that something was wrong when I turned and picked them off one by one. Stepping over the litter of bodies, I poked my head into the inner office and called out.

"Hoo-hoo, Captain, I see you."

He turned from the safe, growling some nautical oath, and caught the needle in the side of his neck. He folded as quickly as the others. My drug is potent, swift and soporific. Already snores were

rising from the room behind me. The payroll was there, stacks of crisp bills arranged neatly in a nest of trays. I snapped open my folding suitcase and was reaching for the first bundle of green goodness when the glass crashed out of the window and the gun hammered bullets in my direction.

I WAS no longer there. If who ever wanted me perforated had fired through the glass I would have been thoroughly punctured by the lead slugs the people of this time favored, but he had not. His pausing to break the glass before firing had given me that fraction of a second to take the kind of action always suspicious reflexes are constantly waiting for. I was over and back in a tumbling roll, minibombs from my sleeve hold-out dropping into my fingers even before I hit the floor. Both flash and smoke. They thudded and flared and the air was instantly opaque. I sent more after the first and the firing stopped. I wriggled along the floor like a snake and, with the bulk of the safe between myself and the window, began stuffing the bag full of money, working by touch. The circumstance that I was trapped and in mortal danger was no reason to leave the loot. If I was going to all

this trouble I ought at least to be paid for it, I felt.

Dragging both bags behind me I crawled toward the outer office and was about to go through the doorway when the loudhailer blared outside.

“We know you’re in there. Come out and surrender or we’ll gun you down. The building is surrounded. You don’t have a chance.”

The smoke thinned out near the door and, standing in the darkness, I could see through the windows that the voice had been speaking the truth. There were trucks out there, presumably loaded with hard-eyed and armed SP’s. As well as jeeps with heavy machine guns mounted in their rears. Quite a reception committee.

“You’ll never take me alive,” I shouted, sowing smoke and flare bombs in all directions—I even dropped a larger grenade that took out part of the rear wall. Under cover of all this excitement I crawled over to the sleeping chief and peeled off his jacket by touch. A lad of long service, he had more stripes than a tiger and hash marks up to his elbows. I threw my jacket aside and donned his, then traded hats as well. The people outside seemed to have set an elaborate trap, which meant they

knew more about me than I cared to have them know. But this knowledge could be turned against them by a swift change in rank. I flipped a few more bombs about, put my gun into my pocket, picked up both bags and unlocked and flung the front door open.

"Don't shoot—" I called out in a hoarse voice as I stumbled out into the fresh air and stood in the open doorway, a perfect target. "Don't shoot—he's got a gun in my back. I'm a hostage—"

I tried to look terrified, which required little effort when I saw the small army facing me. I staggered forward a half step and looked over my shoulder, letting everyone get a good view of me while attempting to ignore the feeling that I had a bull's-eye painted on my chest, the big black spot right over my heart.

No one fired.

I stretched the moment a bit, then dived off the steps.

"Shoot. Get him! I'm clear—"

The result was most spectacular. All of the guns let go at once, blew the door from the frame and the glass from the windows. The whole front of the building became as perforated as a collander.

"Aim high—" I called out, crawling for the protection of the nearest jeep. "All our guys are on the floor."

THEY shot high and vigorously and began to separate the top of the building from the bottom. I crept past the jeep and an officer came over to me and collapsed as I broke a sleep-gas capsule under his nose.

"The lieutenant's hit," I cried as I shoved him and the bags into the back of the jeep. "Get him out of here."

The driver was very obliging and did as ordered, barely giving me time to get in myself. Before we had gone five meters the gunner was sleeping next to the lieutenant, and as soon as the driver shifted into high gear he dozed as well. Getting him out of the seat and getting myself into it was tricky while bouncing along at a good clip, but I managed it. Then I stood on the gas pedal.

It did not take them long to catch on. In fact the first of the jeeps was after me even as I was stuffing the driver in back with the others. This barrier of bodies was a blessing—because of it no more guns were going off. But they certainly were in hot pursuit. I did a sharp turn around a building and sent a platoon of boots jumping for cover, then took a fast look at the pursuers. My! Twenty, thirty vehicles of all kinds tore along after me. Cars, jeeps, trucks, even a motorcycle or two, passing each

other, horns and sirens going, having a wonderful time. Jim diGriz, benefactor of mankind. Wherever I go happiness follows. I turned into a large hangar and rushed between rows of parked helicopters. Mechanics dived aside in a cloud of flying tools as I skittered between the machines in a tight turn back toward the open front. As I emerged on one side my followers were rushing in at the other. Very exciting.

Helicopters—why not? This was Bream Field, the self-proclaimed helicopter capital of the world. If they could fix the things they could fly them. By now the entire naval station would be locked tight and surrounded. I had to find another way out. Off to one side the green glass form of the tower loomed up and I headed in that direction. The flight line was before me and a fat-bellied helicopter stood there, motor rumbling and blades swishing slowly. I squealed the jeep to a stop below the gaping door. When I stood up to throw my bags into the copter a heavy boot kicked out at my head.

The people here had been alerted by radio, of course—as probably had everyone else in a hundred-mile radius. It was annoying. I had to duck, grab the boot and wrestle with its owner while my horde of faithful followers roared

up behind me. The boot's owner knew entirely too much about this kind of fighting so I cheated and shortened the match by shooting him in the leg with one of my needles. Then I threw the money into his machine, hurled some sleep-gas grenades after it—and finally myself.

Not wanting to disturb the pilot, who was snoring at the controls, I slipped into the copilot's seat and bugged my eyes at the dials and knobs. There were certainly enough of them for such a primitive device. By trial and error I managed to find the ones I wanted, but by this time I was surrounded by a solid ring of vehicles and a crowd of white-hatted club-and-gun-bearing SP's were fighting to be first into the copter. The sleep gas dropped them, even the ones wearing gas masks, and I waited until I had a full load, then pulled the throttle full on.

THERE have been better take-offs but, as an instructor once told me, anything that gets you airborne is satisfactory. The machine shuddered and shimmied and wallowed about. I saw men diving for safety below and felt the crunch of the landing gear against the top of a truck. Then we were up and sagging away in a slow turn. Toward the ocean and the south. It

was not chance alone that had led me to this particular military establishment when my funds ran low. Bream Field is situated in the lower corner of California with the Pacific Ocean on one side and Mexico on the other. Which is as far south and as far west as you can go and stay in the United States. I no longer wished to stay in the United States. Not with what looked like all of the navy and marine helicopters in the country rumbling up after me. I'm sure the fighter planes were on the way. But Mexico is a sovereign nation, a different country, and the pursuit could not follow me there. I hoped. At least it would pose some problems. And before the problems had been solved I would be long gone.

As the white beaches and blue water flew by beneath me I worked on a simple escape plan. And familiarized myself with the controls. After a bit of trial and error and a few sickening lurches I found the automatic pilot. A nice device that could be set to hover or to follow a course. Just what I needed. The mere sight of it provided my plan, complete and clear. Below me the border rushed up, then the bull ring and the pink, lavender and yellow houses of a Mexican beach resort. They swept by and the grim coast-

line of Baja California began. Black teeth of rocks in the foam, sand and sharp gorges cutting down to the sea, gray mesquite, dusty cactus. An occasional house or campsite. Dead ahead a rocky peninsula jutted out into the ocean and I pulled the machine up over it and down on the other side. The rest of the copters were only seconds behind me.

Seconds were all I needed. I set the controls to hover and climbed down among the sleeping defenders of the law. The ocean was about ten meters below, the great spinning rotors sending up clouds of spray from it. I threw both my bags out into the water and had turned to inject the pilot in the neck even before the bags hit. He was stirring and blinking—the sleep-gas antidote is almost instantaneous—as I set the robot pilot for forward flight and dived for the open door.

It was a close thing. The copter was moving forward at full blast as I tumbled into the air. It wasn't much of a dive but I did manage to get my feet down so they hit first. I went under, swallowed some water, coughed, swam up and banged my head on one of the floating bags. I congratulated myself on my foresight in having bought the new non-sinkable type. But the wa-

ter was far colder than I had thought it would be and I was shivering and a cramp was beginning in my left leg. The bag gave me some support so that, kicking and floundering, I splashed over and grabbed the other one. As I secured my gains a mighty roar came overhead as the rumbling crowd of helicopters hurtled past like avenging angels. I'm sure that no one in them was looking down at the water—all attention seemed fixed upon the single copter rushing south ahead of them. Even as I looked this machine began to bob and turned in a slow arc. A delta-wing jet appeared suddenly, diving past it, coming up and around. I had a little time but not very much. And could see absolutely no place to hide on the exposed rock of the peninsula or the bare sand of the shore.

Improvise, I told myself as I paddled and puffed toward the shore. *They don't call you Slippery Jim for nothing. Slip out of this one...*

The cramp took over and all I felt like doing was slipping under the water. Then firm sand was under my feet and I staggered, gasping, up onto the beach.

I HAD to hide without being hidden. Camouflage, one of mother nature's original tricks. The an-

gry copters were still buzzing about on the horizon as I began to dig furiously at the sand with my bare hands.

Stop, I ordered myself and sat up, swaying. *Use your brains not your muscles—lesson number one...*

Of course. I slipped an explosive grenade into my hand, triggered it and dropped it into the shallow hole, then dived aside. It whoomphed satisfactorily and sent up a spray of sand. And left a tidy crater that was just the right size for the two bags. I hurled them into it and began to undress frantically, throwing my clothes after the bags.

The copters must have been chatting with each other—they were turning and starting back down the beach. Entirely by chance, vanity had goaded me into putting on purple underwear this morning—it could easily pass for swimming attire from a distance. I stripped down to shorts and kicked sand into the hole, covering everything.

By the time the first copter swished by overhead I was lying face down and sunning myself, just another swimmer on a beach. They swept overhead in a line. I sat up and looked at them as anyone would with all this going on. Then they were past—bobbing up

over the rocky spine—and gone, motors rumbling out of hearing.

But not for long—I heard and saw them again. Whoever was in charge had ordered a sweep in line abreast covering the ocean, beach and hills. Now they were slower, searching every inch of the way, undoubtedly with high-powered glasses. Time for another swim. I shivered when the spray curled around my ankles and knew I was turning blue as the water crept ever upwards. A wave broke over my head and then I was swimming.

A copter came to hover over me, sending up clouds of spray. I shook my fist up at it and shouted realistic curses into the sound of its engine. Someone was leaning out of the open doorway, calling to me, but I was not listening. After a certain amount of fist-shaking I submerged and swam underwater, trying to make my one uncramped leg do the work of two. The copter was swinging away after the others as I painfully made my way ashore again and sprawled on the sand so the wind and sun could dry me.

Now how did I get out of here?

II

AS SOON as the copters were out of sight I dug like a mole

and unearthed my clothing and the bags, rushing them up the beach above the highwater mark. Another bomb and another interment, only this time I put on my trousers and shoes—and made sure some of my equipment went into the pockets. A few quick cuts transformed the long-sleeved uniform shirt into a short-sleeved sport shirt. As this clothing began to dry it lost all resemblance to any part of a military dress. Before leaving I scuffed and dragged the sand to obliterate all signs of digging and took careful triangulations of some large inland peaks so I could find the spot again. Then I headed for the coast road that passed a few hundred meters away.

My luck held. I had no sooner climbed into the northbound lane when a beetlelike machine with high wheels came rushing towards me. I raised my thumb in the universal gesture and was answered by a squealing of brakes. I saw now that powered surfboards were sticking out of the vehicle's back. Two tanned young men sat in the front, their garments even more disarrayed than mine. A fashion, I knew, so perhaps they took me for one of their own.

"Man, you look wet," one commented as I climbed into the back.

"Baby, I was high and took a watery trip."

"Gotta try that some time," the driver answered and the machine hurled itself down the road.

Less than a minute later two hulking black sedans with flashing lights and howling sirens tore down the road in the opposite direction. The large letters POLICIA were painted on their side and required little linguistic knowledge to translate. My new friends, refusing the offer of refreshment, let me off in downtown Tijuana and raced away. I sat at an outside table with a large tequila, lime and salt, and realized that I had just escaped from a carefully planned trap.

And a trap it was. That was obvious now that I had time to stop and think about it. All those jeeps and trucks had not appeared out of thin air and it is doubtful that amount of firepower could have been organized so quickly even if an alarm had gone off. I went back over my motions, step by step, and was absolutely sure that I had activated no alarms.

So how had they known what was going to happen?

They knew because some time-hopper had read the newspapers after the event then had jumped back in time to give the warning. I had been expecting this to happen—but that did not mean I had to enjoy it. I licked the salt from

the base of my thumb, downed the bulk of the tequila and bit hard into the lime. The combination tasted marvelous as it burned a course of acid destruction down my throat.

He was alive. I had wiped out his organization in this happy year of 1975 A.D. but *He* had gone on to bigger and worse nastiness in another era. The time war was on again.

Now *He* and his madmen wanted to control all history and all time, an insane idea that might very well succeed, since they had already wiped out the Special Corps in the future, the one law-abiding organization that might have beaten them. Or rather they had wiped out all of the Corps except me, while I had bounced into the past to wipe out the wiper-outers and in doing so restore the Corps to the probable paths of future history. Big assignment, of which I had accomplished ninety-nine point nine percent. It was the vital one-tenth of a percent that was still causing trouble—the monster *He*, who had escaped me at the end of a time helix even though he had been nicely peppered with exploding slugs from my gun. Probably had armored guts. Next time I would use something stronger. An atomic bomb on his breakfast tray.

TOWORK. I *had* hoped that a time helix could be built to whip me back to the future—rather, ahead to the future—grammar leaves a certain amount to be desired when it comes to traveling through time. Back/ahead to the arms of my Angelina and the acclaim of my peers. But not right now since they did not even exist. Time war is tricky and can become confusing. I was glad that I did not need to know the theory but could just be whipped back and forth by others like a temporal paddle-ball to do my violent best at whatever the assignment required.

There was little difficulty in obtaining a car and digging up the money early the next morning, although certain plainclothes observers had to be induced to sleep soundly instead of doing their jobs. Smuggling the money back into the United States was even easier and before noon I was in the offices of Whizzer Electronics, Incorporated, in San Diego. A large and complete laboratory, a small front office with a not too bright receptionist—and that was it. I had set the place up as best I could and it was up to Professor Coypu now to take over.

“Do you understand, Professor?” I asked, talking to the small black box with his name on it. “All

set up and ready to go.” I shook the box. “Some day you must tell me how your memories can exist in this recorder if you don’t exist or won’t exist in this galaxy because He and his nuts have destroyed the Corps. Better some day you don’t tell me. I’m not sure I really want to know.”

I held the box up and gave it a scan around the room.

“The finest equipment stolen money can afford. Every up-to-date research tool I could lay my hands on. Stocks of spare parts of all kinds. A supply of raw material. Catalogs from all the electronic, physical and chemical manufacturers. A large bank balance to draw upon to buy what you need. A pile of signed checks waiting to be filled out. Language lessons neatly taped. Instructions, a history of what has happened, the works. Over to you, Professor, and take it easy with this body. It’s the only one we have.”

Before I could change my mind I lay back on the couch, stuck the contact from the memory box to the back of my neck and turned on the switch.

What’s happening? Coypu asked, slithering into my mind.

“A lot. You’re in my brain, Coypu, so don’t do anything dangerous.”

Most interesting. Yes, your body

indeed. Let me move that arm now, stop interfering. In fact why don't you go away for a bit while I see what is happening.

"I'm not so sure that I want to."

Well, you must. Here, I'll push.

"No!" I shouted—not that it did any good. A formless blackness pressed down on me and I spiraled out of sight into a greater darkness below, pushed away by Coypu's electronically magnified memories . . .

time
goes
by
so
slowly

THE black box was in my hand, the name COYPU written in rough white letters across its front. My fingers were on a switch that was turned to OFF.

Memory returned and I staggered mentally and looked around for a chair so I could sit down. Until I discovered that I was already sitting down, so I sat harder.

I had been away and someone else had been running my body. Now that I was back in charge I could detect faint traces of memories of work, a lot of work, a great period of time, days, perhaps weeks. There were burns and

callouses on my fingers and a new scar on the back of my right hand. A tape recorder rustled to life—a timer must have turned it on—and Professor Coypu spoke to me.

"To begin with—do not do this again. Do not allow this recorded memory of my brain into control of your body. Because I can remember everything. I remember that I no longer exist. This brain-in-a-box is all there may ever be of me. If I turn off the switch I cease to be. The switch may never be turned on again. Probably won't. This is suicide and I am not the suicidal type. Impossibly hard to touch the switch. I think I can do it now. I know what is at stake. Something a lot bigger than the pseudolife of this taped brain. So I will do my best to turn the switch. I doubt I could do it a second time. As I said, don't do this again. Be warned."

"I'm warned, I'm warned," I muttered, turning off the tape while I found myself a drink. Coypu was a good man. The bar was stocked as I had left it and a treble malt whisky on the rocks cleared some of the muzziness from my head. I settled down and turned the tape on again.

"To business. Once I began investigating it became obvious why these temporal criminals chose this particular epoch. This

society is just bursting into the age of technology, yet the people still have their minds in the dark ages. Their nationalism is sheer folly; their pollution, criminal; their intraglobal wars, madness—”

“Enough lecturing, Coypu, on with the show.”

“—but there is no need to lecture on this subject. Suffice it to say that all the materials for a time helix are available here. And the societal setup is such that a major operation of time tinkering can successfully be concealed. I have constructed a time helix and it is coiled and set. I have also built a time-tracer and with it have ascertained the temporal position of this creature called He. For reasons best known to him He is now operating out of the fairly recent past of this planet, some one hundred and seventy years ago. I am only guessing now, but I think his entire present operation is a trap. Undoubtedly for you. In some manner I cannot discover he has erected a time block before the year eighteen-o-five. So you cannot return to an early enough period to catch him as he is building his present establishment. Be wary, he must be working with a large force. I have marked the controls so you can pick any of the five years after eighteen-o-five during which they are operating. In a city

named London. The choice is yours. Good luck.”

I FLICKED off the recorder and went after more drink, depressed. Some choice. I could pick my own year to get blasted. Nip back into the prescientific past and shoot it out with the minions of He. Even if I won—so what? I would be stranded there for life, stuck in time. A dismal prospect. Yet I had to go. In reality I only had the illusion of choice. He was tracking me down in the year 1975 and the next time he might very well succeed in polishing me off. Far better to carry the fight to him. Rah-rah. I took more drink and reached for the first book on the long shelf.

Coypu had not wasted his time. In addition to wiring up all the hardware he had collected a neat little library about the years in question, the opening decade of the nineteenth century. London was my destination and I soon realized that the name of one man was of utmost importance to my mission.

Napoleoni Buonaparte. Yes—Napoleon the First, Emperor of France and most of Europe and almost the world. His megalomaniacal ambitions rang a bell, for they differed hardly at all from He's own ambition. There was no

coincidence here; there had to be a connection. I did not yet know what it was, but I was dismally sure that I would find out quickly enough. In the meantime I read through all the books on the period until I felt I knew what I had to know. The only bright spot in the whole affair was the fact that England spoke a variety of the same speech as America, so I would not have to put up with any more brainpuncturing language lessons with the memorygram.

Of course there was the matter of local dress, but Coypu had gathered more than enough illustrations of the period to show me what was needed. In fact a theatrical outfitter in Hollywood supplied me with a complete wardrobe, from kneepants and buttoned jackets to great cloaks and beaver hats. The styles of the time were quite attractive and I took to them instantly, concealing a number of my devices in their voluminous folds.

Since I would return to the same time in time whatever time I left the present time I took my time with the arrangements. But, eventually, I ran out of excuses. The moment had come. My weapons and tools were adjusted and ready, my health was perfect, my reflexes keen, my morale low. But what must be done must be done. I

appeared in the front office and the receptionist gaped up at me chewingummily from over her confession magazine.

“Miss Kipper, draw up a salary check for four weeks for yourself in lieu of notice.”

“You don’t like my work?”

“Your work has been all that I desired. But due to mismanagement this firm is now bankrupt. I am going abroad to dodge my creditors.”

“Gee, that’s too bad.”

“Thank you for your solicitude. Now if I can sign that check—”

We shook hands and I ushered her out. The rent was paid for a month ahead and the landlord was welcome to the equipment left behind. But I had fixed a destruct on the time helix apparatus that would operate after I had gone. There was enough tinkering with time as it was and I felt no desire to bring any more players into the game.

IT WAS a labor to jam myself into the spacesuit with all my clothes on. In the end I had to take off both boots and jacket and strap these outside with the rest of my equipment. Heavily laden, I waddled over to the control board and braced myself for a final decision. I knew where I would arrive and, following Coypu’s

instructions, had set the proper coordinates into the machine days earlier. London was out of the question—if He's minions had any detection apparatus at all they would spot my arrival. I wanted to arrive far enough away geographically so they would not spot me, but close enough so I would not have to suffer a long journey by the primitive transportation of the time. Everything I had read about it caused me to shudder.

So I compromised on the Thames Valley near Oxford. The bulk of the Chilterns would be between me and London and their solid rock would absorb radar, zed rays or any other detection radiation. Once I had arrived I could make my way to London by water, a matter of some one hundred kilometers, rather than by the ghastly roads of the period.

That was where I was arriving—when was another matter. I stared intensely at the neatly numbered dials as though they could tell me something. They were mute. A time barrier had been set up at 1805, I could not arrive earlier. 1805 itself seemed too much of a trap, they would surely be ready, waiting and alert at that time. So I had to arrive later. But not too much later or they would have accomplished whatever evil

they had in mind. Two years, then—not too long for them to work, but enough time so that they might—hopefully—be a little off guard. I took a deep breath and set the dials for 1807. And pressed the actuator. In two minutes the timer would cut in full power. With leaden feet I shuffled toward the glowing green coil of the time helix and touched the barlike end.

As before, there was no sensation, just the glow surrounding me so that the room beyond was hard to see. The two minutes seemed closer to two hours, although my watch told me there were more than fifteen seconds to go to springoff. This time I closed my eyes, remembering the uneasy sensations of my last time hop. I was tense, nervous and blind when the helix released and hurled me back through time.

The experience was not enjoyable. As the helix unwound I was whipped into the past while its energy was expended into the future. An interesting concept that did not interest me in the slightest. For some reason this trip churned up my guts more than the last one had and I was very occupied with convincing myself that whoopsing inside a spacesuit is a not nice thing. When I had this licked I realized that the falling sensation was caused by the fact

that I *was* falling—I snapped open my eyes to see that I was in a pelting rainstorm. And dimly seen, close below, were sodden fields and sharp-looking trees rushing up at me.

After some panicky fumbling with the wrist control for the grav-chute I managed to turn it on full and the harness creaked and groaned at the sudden deceleration. I creaked and groaned too as the straps felt as though they were slicing through my flesh to the bone beneath—which they would quickly abrade away. I honestly expected my arms to drop off and my legs to fly by when I crashed down through the small branches of a waiting tree, caromed off a larger branch and smacked into the ground below. Of course the grav-chute was still working on full lift and as soon as the grassy slope had broken my fall I was up and away again, hitting the branch a second lick for luck on the way by and springing up out of the treetop in a great welter of twigs and leaves. Once more I fumbled for the control and tried to do a better job of it. I drifted down, around the tree this time, dropped like a sodden feather onto the grass and lay there for a bit.

“A wonderful landing, Jim,” I groaned, feeling for broken bones. “You ought to be in the circus.”

I WAS battered but sound, a fact I realized after a painpill had cleared my head and numbed my nerve endings. I looked around through the lessening rain, but could see no one—or any sign of human habitation. Some cows in the adjoining field grazed on, undisturbed by my dramatic appearance.

I began to unburden myself under the shelter of the large tree. The first thing off was the collapsible container I had constructed with great ingenuity. It opened out and assembled into a brassbound leather chest typical of the period. Everything else, including the spacesuit and grav-chute fitted into it. By the time I had loaded and locked it the rain had stopped and a frail sun was working hard to get through the clouds. The hour was mid-afternoon at least, I judged by its height. Time enough to reach shelter by nightfall. But which way? A rutted path through the cowfield must lead somewhere so I took that downhill, climbing the drystone fence to reach it. The cows rolled round eyes in my direction but otherwise ignored me. They were large animals, familiar to me only through photographs, and I tried to remember what I had heard about their pugnacity. These beasts apparently did not remember

either and did not bother me as I went down the path, chest on shoulder, ready to face the world.

The path led to a stile that faced onto a country lane. Good enough. I climbed over and was considering which direction to take when a rustic conveyance made its presence known by a great squeaking and a wave of airborne effluvium carried by the breeze. It clattered into sight soon after, a two-wheeled wooden artifact drawn by a singularly bony horse and containing a full load of what I have since determined to be manure, a natural fertilizer much valued for its aid to crops and its ability to produce one of the vital ingredients of gunpowder. The operator of this contrivance was a drab-looking peasant in shapeless clothes who rode on a platform in front. I stepped into the road and raised my hand. He tugged on a series of straps that guided the pulling beast and everything groaned to a stop. He stared down at me, chomping empty gums in memory of long-vanished teeth, then reached up and knuckled his forehead. I had read about this rite, that represented the relationship of the lower class to the upper classes, and knew that my choice of costume had been correct.

"I am going to Oxford, my good man," I said.

"Ey?" he answered, cupping one grimy hand behind his ear.

"Oxford!" I shouted.

"Aye, Oxford," he nodded in happy agreement. "It be that way." He pointed back over his shoulder.

"I'm going there. Will you take me?"

"I be going that way." He pointed down the lane.

I took a golden sovereign out of my wallet, purchased from an old coin dealer, more money in one lump than he had probably seen in his entire lifetime, and held it up. His eyes opened wide and his gums snapped nicely.

"I be going to Oxford."

THE less said about this ride the better. While the unsprung dungmobile tortured the sitting part of my anatomy my nose was assaulted by its cargo. But we were at least going in the correct direction. My chauffeur cackled and mumbled incomprehensibly to himself, wild with glee at his golden windfall, urging the ancient nag to its tottering top speed. The sun broke through as we came out of the trees and ahead were the gray towers of the university, pale against the darker slate gray of the clouds, a very attractive sight indeed. While I was admiring it the cart stopped.

“Oxford,” the driver said, pointing a grubby finger. “Magdalen Bridge.”

I climbed down and rubbed my sore hams, looking at the gentle arch of the bridge across the small river. A thud came next to me as my chest hit the ground. I started to protest but my transportation had already wheeled about and was starting back down the road. Since I was no more desirous of entering the city in the cart than he was of taking me I didn't protest. But he might at least have said something. Like goodbye. It didn't really matter. I shouldered the chest and strode forward, pretending I did not see the blue-uniformed soldier standing by the shack at the end of the bridge, holding a great long gunpowder weapon of some sort that terminated in what appeared to be a sharp blade. But he saw me well enough and lowered the device so it blocked my way and pushed his dark-bearded face close to mine.

“Casket vooleyfoo?” he said, or something like that. Impossible to understand, a city dialect, perhaps, since I had had no trouble understanding the rustic who had brought me here.

“Would you mind repeating that?” I asked in the friendliest of manners

“Koshown onglay,” he growled

and whipped the wooden lower end of his weapon up to catch me in the midriff.

This was not very nice of him and I showed my distaste by stepping to one side so the blow missed and returned the favor by planting my knee in his midriff instead. He bent in the middle so I chopped him in the back of the neck when that target presented itself. Since he was unconscious I seized his weapon so it would not be actuated when it dropped.

All of this had happened in the shortest of times. I was aware of the wide-eyed stares of the passing citizenry, as well as the ferocious glare of another soldier in the doorway of the ramshackle building. He was raising his own weapon toward me. This was certainly not the way to make a quiet entrance into the city, but now that I had started this escapade, I had to finish it.

With the thought the deed. I dived forward, which enabled me to put down my chest while I avoided the weapon at the same time. I heard an explosion and a tongue of flame shot past my head. Then the butt of my newly acquired weapon came up and caught my latest opponent under the chin. He went back and down with me right behind him. If there were others inside it would be best

to tackle them in the enclosed space.

There certainly were other soldiers, a goodly number of them. After taking care of the nearest ones with a little dirty infighting I triggered a sleep gas grenade to silence the rest. I had to do this—but I didn't like it. Keeping a wary eye on the door I quickly mussed the clothing and kicked the ribs of the men who had succumbed to the gas in order to suggest that they had been felled by violence of some kind.

Now how did I get out of this? Quickly was the best idea since the citizenry would have spread the alarm by now. Yet when I reached the doorway I saw that the passersby had drawn close and were trying to see what had happened.

When I stepped outside they smiled and shouted happily and one of them called out loudly.

"A cheer for his lordship! Look what he done to the Frenchies!"

Glad cries rang out as I stood there, dazed. Something was very wrong. Then I realized that one fact had been nagging at me ever since I had my first look at the colleges. A flag was flying proudly from atop the nearest tower. But where were the crossed crosses of England?

This was the tricolor of France.

III

WHILE I was trying to figure this one out a man in plain brown leather clothes pushed through the cheering crowd and shouted its members into silence.

"Get home, the lot of you, before the frogs come and kill you all. And don't say a word about this or you'll be hanging from the town gate."

Looks of quick fear replaced the people's elation and they began to move at once, all except two men who pushed past me to pick up the weapons strewn about inside. The sleep gas had dispersed so I let them pass. The first man touched two fingers to his cap and came up to me.

"That was well done, sir, but you'll have to move out quick because someone will have heard that shot."

"Where shall I go? I've never been to Oxford before in my life."

He looked me up and down quickly, in the same way I was sizing him up, and came to a decision.

"You'll come with us."

It was a close run thing because I heard the tread of heavy marching boots on the bridge even as we nipped down a side lane burdened with the guns. But these men were locals and knew all the turnings

and bypaths and we were never in any danger that I could see. We ran and walked in silence for the better part of an hour before we reached a large barn that was apparently our destination. I followed the others in and put my chest on the floor. When I straightened the two men who had been carrying the guns took me by the arms, while the man in leather held what appeared to be an exceedingly sharp knife to my throat.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Brown, John Brown. From America. And what is your name?"

"Brewster." Then, without changing the level tone of his voice. "Can you give me reason why we should not kill you for the spy you are?"

I smiled calmly to show him how foolish the thought was. Inside I was not calm at all.

Think fast, Jim, because a knife kills just as thoroughly as an A-bomb.

What did I know? French soldiers were occupying Oxford. Which meant that they must have invaded England successfully and occupied all or part of it. There was resistance to this invasion—the people holding me proved that—so I took my clue from this fact and tried to improvise.

"I am here on a secret mission." Always good. The knife still pressed against my throat. "America, as you know, sides with your cause—"

"America helps the Frenchies. Your Benjamin Franklin has said so."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Franklin has a great responsibility. France is too strong to fight now, so we side with her. On the surface. But there are men like me who come to bring you aid."

"Prove it?"

"How can I? Papers can be forged. They would be death to carry in any case and you wouldn't believe them. But I have something that speaks the truth. I was on my way to London to deliver it to certain people there."

"Who?" Had the knife moved away the slightest amount?

"I will not tell you. But there are men like you all over England, who wish to throw off the tyrant's yoke. We have contacted some of the groups and I am delivering the evidence I spoke of."

"What is it?"

"Gold."

THAT stopped them. I felt the grip on my arms lessen. I pressed the advantage.

"You have never seen me before and will probably never see me

again. But I can give you the help you need to buy weapons, bribe soldiers, help those imprisoned. Why do you think I assaulted those soldiers in public today?"

"Tell us," Brewster said.

"To meet you." I looked slowly around at their surprised faces. "There are loyal Englishmen in every part of this land who hate the invaders, who will fight to hurl them from these green shores. But how can they be contacted and helped? I have just shown you one way—and have provided you with these arms. I will now give you gold to carry on the struggle. As I trust you, you must trust me. If you wish you will have enough gold to slip away from here and live your lives out happily in some kinder part of the world. But I don't think you will. You risked your lives for those weapons. You will do what you know is right. I will give you the gold and then go away. We will never meet again. We must act on trust."

"Sounds good to me, Brewster," one of the men said.

"Me, too," said the other. "Let's take the gold."

"I'll take the gold if there's any to be taken," Brewster said, lowering the knife but still uncertain. "It could all be a lie."

"It could be," I said quickly, before he started punching holes in

my flimsy story. "But it isn't—nor does it matter. You'll see that I'm well away tonight and we will never meet again."

"The gold," my guard said.

"Let's see it," Brewster said.

I opened the chest with utmost care while a gun was kept pressed to my kidney. I had the gold—that was the only part of my story that was true. It was divided into a number of small leather bags and intended to finance this operation—as it was doing now. I took out a bag and solemnly handed it to Brewster.

He shook some of the glittering granules into his hand and they all stared. I pushed.

"How do I get to London?" I asked. "By river?"

"Sentries guard every lock of the Thames," Brewster said, still looking at the golden gravel upon his palm. "You wouldn't get as far as Abingdon. By horse is the only way. Back roads."

"I don't know the back roads. I'll need two horses and someone to guide me. I can pay—"

"Luke, here, will take you," he said, finally looking up. "Used to be a drayman. But only to the walls. You'll have to get past the Frenchies yourself."

"That will be fine." So London was occupied. And what about the rest of England?

Brewster went out to take care of the horses and Guy produced some coarse bread and cheese, as well as some ale which was more welcome. We talked—rather, they talked and I listened, occasionally putting in a word but afraid of asking questions that might prove my almost total ignorance. But a picture finally developed. England was completely occupied and pacified, had been for some years—the exact number was not clear—although fighting was still going on in Scotland. There were dark memories of the invasion, of great cannon that did terrible damage. The Channel fleet had been destroyed in a single battle. I could detect the cloven hoof of He behind a lot of it. History had been rewritten.

YET this particular past was not the past of the future I had just come from. My head started to ache, thinking about it. Did this world exist in a loop of time, separate from the mainstream of history? Or was it an alternate world? Professor Coypu would know, but I did not think he would enjoy being plucked out of his memory tape again just to answer my questions. I would have to work it out without him.

Think, Jim, put the old brain-box into gear. You take pride in

what you call your intelligence—so apply it to something beside crookery for a change. There must be some form of logic here. Statement A: in the future this past did not exist. B: it sure exists now . . .

But C might indicate that my presence here would destroy this past, even the memory of this past. I had no idea of how this might be accomplished, but it was such a warm and cheering thought that I grabbed onto it. Jim diGriz history-changer, world-shaker. It made a pleasant image and I treasured it as I dozed off on the hay—and awoke not too long afterward scratching at insect life that was after my hot body.

The horses did not arrive until after dark and we agreed that it would be best to leave at dawn. I managed to get some bug spray out of my chest to kill off my attackers so I enjoyed a relatively peaceful night before the ride in the morning.

The ride! We were three days en route and before we reached London even my saddle sores had saddle sores. My primitive companion actually seemed to enjoy the trip, treating it as an outing of sorts, chatting about the country we passed through and getting falling down drunk each evening at the inns where we stopped. We had

crossed the Thames above Henley and made a long loop to the south, staying away from all sizable centers of population. When we reached the Thames again at Southwark, London Bridge was before us and the roofs and spires of London beyond. A little hard to see because of the high wall that stretched along the opposite riverbank. The wall had a crisp, clean look to it, far different from the smoke-stained gray of the rest of the city—and a sudden thought struck me.

"That wall—it's new, isn't it?"

"Aye, finished two years back. Many died there, women and children, everyone driven like slaves by Bony to put it up. Right around the city it goes. No reason for it—just that he's mad."

There was a reason for it and, ego-flattering as it was, I still didn't like it. That wall was built for me, to keep me out.

"We must find a quiet inn," I said.

"The George, right down here." He smacked his mouth loudly. "Good ale, too, the best."

"You enjoy it. I want something right on the river, within sight of that bridge there."

"Know just the place—the Boar and Bustard on Pickle Herring Street, right at the foot of Vine Lane. Fine ale there."

THE foulest brew was fine with Luke as long as it contained alcohol. But the Boar and Bustard suited my needs perfectly. A disreputable establishment with a cracked signboard above the door depicting an improbable looking swine and an even more impossible looking bird squaring off at each other. There was a rickety dock to the rear where thirsty boatmen could tie up—and a room I could have that looked out on the river. As soon as I had arranged for the stabling of my horse and argued over the price of the room I bolted the door and unpacked the electronic telescope. This produced a clear, large detailed, depressing picture of the city across the river.

It was surrounded by that wall, ten meters high of solid brick and stone—undoubtedly bristling with detection apparatus of all kinds. If I tried to go under or over it I would be spotted. Forget the wall. The only entrance I could see from this vantage point was at the other end of London Bridge and I studied this carefully. Traffic moved slowly across the bridge because everything and everyone was carefully searched before they were allowed to enter. French soldiers probed and investigated everything. And one by one the people were led through a door-

way into a building on the other side of the wall. As far as I could tell they all emerged—but would I? What happened in that building? I had to find out and the ale room below was just the place.

Everyone loves a freespender and I was all of that. The one-eyed landlord muttered and snaffled to himself and managed to find a drinkable bottle of claret in his cellar. This bottle I kept for myself. The locals were more than happy to consume blackjack after blackjack of ale. These containers were made of leather covered with tar, which added a certain novelty to the flavor, but the customers did not seem to mind. My best informant was a bristle-bearded drover named Quinch. He was one of the men who moved the cattle from the pens to the knackers' yard, where he also assisted the butchers in their bloody tasks. His sensibilities, as one might suspect, were not of the highest, but his capacity for drink was and when he drank he talked and I hung from every word. He entered and left London every day and bit by bit, through the spate of profanity and abuse, I put together what I hoped was an accurate picture of the entrance procedures.

There was a search, that much I could see from my window. At

times a close search, at other times superficial. But there was one part of the routine that never varied.

Every person entering the city had to put his arm into a hole in the wall of the guardhouse. That was all, just put it in. Not touch anything at all, just in up to the elbow and out.

Over this I brooded, sipping my wine and ignoring the roars of masculine cheer around me. What could they detect from this? Fingerprints perhaps, but I always wore false fingerprint covers as a matter of routine and had changed these three times since the last operation. Temperature? Skin alkalinity? Pulse or blood pressure? Could these residents of what to me was the dim past differ in some bodily composition? It was not unreasonable to expect some changes over a period of more than 30,000 years. I had to find out the present norms.

THIS was done easily enough. I constructed a detector that could record all of these factors and hung it inside my clothing. The pickup was disguised as a ring that I wore on my right hand. The next evening I shook hands with everyone I could, finished my wine and retired to my chamber. The recordings were precise,

accurate to $\pm 0.006\%$ and very revealing—of the fact that my personal readings fell well inside all the normal variations.

You are not thinking, Jim, I accused myself in the warped mirror. There has to be a reason for that hole in the wall. And the reason is a detection instrument of some kind. What does it detect? I turned away from the accusing stare. *Come, come, don't evade the question. If you cannot answer it that way turn it on its head. What is it possible to detect?*

This was more like it. I pulled out a piece of paper and began to list all the things that can be observed and measured, going right down the frequencies. Light, heat, radio waves, etc., then off into vibration and noise, radar reflections, anything and everything, not attempting to apply the things detected to the human body. Not yet. I did this after I had made the list as complete as possible. When I had covered the paper I shook hands with myself triumphantly and reread it for human applications.

Nothing. I was depressed again. I threw it away—then grabbed it back. Something, what was it, something relating to something I had heard about Earth. What? Where. There! Destroyed by atomic bombs Coypu had said.

Radioactivity. The atomic age was still in the future, the only radioactivity in this world was natural background radiation. This did not take long to check.

Me, creature of the future, denizen of a galaxy full of harnessed radiation. My body was twice as radioactive as the background count in the room, twice as radioactive as the hot bodies of my friends in the bar when I slipped down to check them out.

Now that I knew what to guard against I could find a way to circumvent it. The old brain turned over. Soon I had a plan and well before dawn I was ready to attack. All of the devices secreted about my person were of plastic, undetectable by a metal detector if they had one working. The items that were made of metal were all in a plastic tube less than a meter long and no thicker than my finger that I coiled up in one pocket. In the darkest hour before the dawn I slipped out and stalked the damp streets looking for my prey.

And found him soon enough, a French sentry guarding one of the entrances to the nearby docks. A quick scuffle, a bit of gas, a limp figure, a dark passageway. Within two minutes I emerged at the opposite end wearing his uniform his gun on my shoulder and carried in the correct French

manner. With my tube of devices down its barrel, let them find *that* metal with a detector. My timing was precise and when, at the first light, the straggling members of the night guard returned to London, I was marching in the last row. I would enter, undetected, the ranks of the enemy. A fool-proof scheme. They wouldn't examine their own soldiers.

More fool I. As we marched through the gate at the far end of the bridge I saw an interesting thing that I could not see with my telescope from my window.

As each soldier marched around the corner of the guardhouse he stopped for a moment under the cold eyes of a sergeant and thrust his arm into a hole in the wall.

IV

“**M**AYERD!” I said as I tripped over the uneven footing on the bridge. I did not know what it meant, but it was the most common word the French soldiers used and seemed to fit the occasion. With this I stumbled into the soldier next to me and my musket caught him a painful blow on the side of the head. He yelped with pain and pushed me away. I staggered back, hit my legs against the low railing and fell into the river.

I managed it neatly. The current was swift. I sank beneath the surface and clamped the musket between my knees so I wouldn't lose it. After that I surfaced just once, splashing at the water and screaming wordlessly. The few soldiers on the bridge milled about, shouting and pointing. When I was sure I had made the desired impression I let my wet clothes and the weight of the gun pull me under again. The oxygen mask was in an inside pocket and it took only seconds to work it out and pull the strap over my head. I cleared the mask of water by exhaling strongly and breathed in pure oxygen. After that it was just a matter of a slow easy swim across the river. The tide was ebbing and the current would carry me well downstream from the bridge before I landed. So I had escaped detection, lived to re-gather my forces and fight again—and was totally depressed by my complete failure to get past the wall. I swam in the murky twilight and tried to think of another plan, but it was not exactly the best place for cogitation. Nor was the water that warm. Thoughts of a roaring fire in my room and a mug of hot rum drove me on for what seemed an exceedingly long time.

Eventually I saw a dark form in

the water ahead—it resolved into the hull of a small ship tied up at a dock. I could see the pilings beyond. I stopped under the keel, worked my tube of instruments out of the musket and also took everything out of my coat. The gun stuffed into the jacket sleeve made a good weight and both vanished toward the river bottom. After some deep breathing I took off the oxygen mask and stowed that away as well, then surfaced as quietly as I could next to the ship.

To look up at the coattails and patched trousers of a French soldier sitting on the rail above me.

He was industriously polishing the blue-black barrel of a singularly deadly looking cannon that projected next to him. It was far more efficient looking than any of the nineteenth century weapons I had seen—in fact, it did not belong to this period at all. Out of more than casual interest I had made a study of weapons available in the era I had recently left so I recognized this one as a 75-millimeter recoilless cannon. An ideal weapon to mount on a light wooden ship, since it could be fired without jarring the vessel to pieces. It could also accurately blow any other wooden ship out of the water long before the other's muzzle-loading cannon were

within range. Not to mention destroying armies in the field. A few hundred of these weapons brought back through time could alter history. And they had. The soldier above turned and spat into the river—I sank beneath the surface again and vanished among the pilings.

There were boat steps farther downriver and out of sight of the French ship. I surfaced there—no one was in sight. Dripping, cold, depressed, I climbed out of the water and hurried toward the dark mouth of the lane between the buildings. Someone was standing there and I scuttled by—then decided to stop.

BECAUSE he put the muzzle of a great ugly pistol into my side.

“Walk ahead of me,” he said. “I will take you to a comfortable place where you can get dry clothing.”

Only he did not say clothing—it sounded more like cloth-eeng. My captor had a French accent.

All I could do was follow instructions, prodded on by the primitive hand cannon. A savage relic or not, it could still blow a nice hole in me. At the far end of the lane a coach had been pulled up to block the lane completely. The door gaped open in unappreciated welcome.

"Get in," my captor said, "I am right behind you. I saw that unfortunate soldier fall from the bridge and drown and I thought to myself, what if he had been on the surface? What if he were a good swimmer and could cross the river, where would he land when moved along by the current? A neat mathematical problem—which I solved and *voilà*, there you were coming out of the water."

The door slammed. The coach started forward and we too were alone. I fell forward, dropped, turned, lunged, grabbed for the pistol—and seized it by the butt because my captor now had it by the barrel and was holding it out to me.

"By all means, you hold the gun, Mr. Brown, if it pleases you, it is no longer needed." He smiled as I gaped, scowled and leveled the pistol at him. "It seemed the simplest way to convince you to join me in the carriage. I have been watching you for some days now and am convinced that you do not like the French invaders."

"But—you are French?"

"But of course. A follower of the late king, a refugee now from the land of my birth. I learned to hate this pipsqueak Corsican while people here were still laughing at him. But no one laughs any longer

and we are united in one cause. But, please, let me introduce myself. The Count d'Hesion—but you may call me Charles since titles are now a thing of the past."

"Pleased to meet you, Charley." We shook on it. "Just call me John."

The coach clattered and groaned to a stop before this interesting conversation could be carried any further. We were in the courtyard of a large house and, still carrying the pistol, I followed the count inside. I was still suspicious but there seemed little to be suspicious of. The servants were all ancient and tottered about muttering French to each other. Knees creaking, one aged retainer poured a bath for me and helped me to strip, completely ignoring the fact that I still held the pistol while he soaped my back. Warm clothes were provided, and good boots, and when I was alone I transferred my armory and devices to my new clothing. The count was waiting in the library when I came down—he was sipping from a crystal glass filled with interesting drink. A brimming container of the same stood close beside him. I handed him the pistol and he handed me a glass of the beverage in return. It glided down my throat like warm music and sent a cloud of delicate vapor

into my nostrils the like of which I had never inhaled before.

"Forty years old, from my own estate, which as you can tell instantly is in Cognac."

I SIPPED again and looked at him. Nobody's fool. Tall and thin with graying hair, a wide forehead, lean, almost ascetic features.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked.

"So we could join forces. I am a student of natural philosophy and I see much that is unnatural. The armies of Napoleon have weapons that were made nowhere in Europe. Some say they come from far Cathay, but I think not. These weapons are served by men who speak very bad French, strange and evil men. There is talk of even stranger and more evil men at the Corsican's elbow. Unusual things are happening in this world. I have been watching for other unusual things and am on the lookout for strangers. Strangers who are not English, such as yourself. Tell me—how can a man swim across a river under water?"

"By using a machine."

There was no point in silence—the count knew very well what he was asking. With those dark cannon out there there was

no point in maintaining secrecy about the nature of the enemy. His eyes had widened at my reply but he took time to finish his drink.

"I thought so. A machine unknown here—save to you. And I think you know more about these strange men and their weapons. They are not of the world as we know it, are they? You have knowledge of them and you are here to fight them?"

"They are from a place of evil and madness and they have brought their crimes with them. And I am fighting them. I cannot tell you everything about them because I don't know the entire story myself. But I am here to destroy them and everything they have done."

"I was sure of it. We must join forces and I will give you whatever help I can."

"You can begin by teaching me French. I have to get into London and it appears that I will need to speak it."

"But is there time?"

"An hour or two will do. Another machine."

"I am beginning to understand. But I am not sure that I like all these machines."

"Machines cannot be liked or disliked—they are immune to emotion. We can use them or misuse them, so the problem of ma-

chines is a human problem, too.

"I bow to your wisdom—you are, of course, right. When do we begin?"

I returned to the Boar and Bustard for my things, then moved into a room in the count's house. A head-splitting evening with the memorygram—headache is a mild word for the side effects of using this memory-cramming machine—taught me conversational French and, to the count's pleasure, we conversed in that language.

"And the next step?" he asked.

"I need to take a closer look at one of those pseudo-Frenchmen who seem to be running things. Do they ever appear alone on this side of the river—or if not alone, in small groups?"

"They do, but their movements follow no set pattern. Therefore I shall obtain the most recent information." He rang the silver bell that stood next to the decanter. "Would you like one of these individuals rendered unconscious or dead and brought to you?"

"You are too kind," I said, holding out my glass so that the servant who had appeared soundlessly could refill it. "I'll handle that end of the business myself. Just point him out and I'll take over from there."

THE count issued instructions. The servant slipped away. I worked on my drink.

"It will not take long," the count said. "And when you have the information—do you have a plan of action?"

"Roughly. I must enter London. Find He, the top demon in this particular corner of hell, then kill him, I imagine. And demolish certain machinery."

"The upstart Corsican—you will remove him, too?"

"Only if he gets in the way. I am no common murderer and find it difficult to kill at any time. But my actions should change the entire operation. The new weapons will no longer be supplied and will soon run out of ammunition. In fact—the interlopers may vanish altogether."

The count raised one eyebrow but was kind enough not to comment.

"The situation is complex, in fact I do not really understand it myself. It has to do with the nature of time, about which I know very little. But it seems that this past, the time we are living in now, does not exist in the future. The history books to come tell us that Napoleon was beaten, his empire wiped out, that Britain was never invaded."

"It should only be!"

"It *may* be—if I can get to He. But if history is changed again, brought back to what it should have been, this entire world as we know it now, may vanish."

"A certain risk must be taken in all hazardous enterprises." The count remained cool and composed, moving one hand in a slight gesture of dismissal as he talked. An admirable man. "If this world disappears it must mean that a happier one will come into existence?"

"That's roughly it."

"Then we must press on. In that better world some other I will be returning to my estates. My family will live again. There will be flowers in the spring and happiness in the land. Giving up this life here will mean little—it is a miserable existence. Though I would prefer that knowledge of this possibility stay locked in this room. I am not sure that all of our assistants will accept such a philosophical viewpoint."

"I agree heartily. I wish it could be some other way."

"Do not concern yourself, my dear friend. We will talk of it no longer."

WE DIDN'T. We discussed art and viticulture and the hazards inherent in the manufacture of distilled beverages. Time

moved quickly—as did the count's men—and even before we started on a second decanter he was called out to receive a report.

"Admirable," he said upon his return, rubbing his hands together with pleasure. "A small party of the men we seek are even now departing themselves in a knocking shop in Mermaid Court. There are guards about, but I presume they offer no barrier to your operation?"

"None," I said, rising. "If you will be kind enough to provide some transportation and a guide I promise to return within the hour."

This was done and I performed as promised. A morose individual with a shaven head and badly scarred face took me in the carriage and pointed out the correct establishment. I entered the building next to it, an office of some kind, now shuttered and locked with a monstrous piece of hardware most difficult to open. Not that the lock mechanisms were beyond me—never!—but they were so big that my lockpick couldn't reach the tumblers. My knife did, though, and I went through and up to the roof and crossed over to the roof of the next building, where I attached the end of my spiderweb to the most solid of the collection of chimneys.

The strand of the web was fine, almost invisible and practically unbreakable, made up of a single long-chain molecule. It ran slowly off the reel that was fastened by a harness to my chest and I dropped toward the dark windows below. Dark to others. But the dual beams of ultraviolet light from the projectors on my UV sensitive goggles turned all light to day for me wherever I looked. I entered the window silently, caught my man with his pants down, rendered him and his companion unconscious with a dose of gas and had him dozing in my arms and back up to the roof as quickly as the fiercely whirring spiderweb reel could lift us.

Minutes later my prize was snoring on a table in the count's cellar, while I spread out my equipment. The count looked on with interest.

"You wish to obtain information from this species of pig? I do not normally condone torture but this seems to be an occasion for hot pokers and sharp blades. The crimes these creatures have committed! It is said the New World aborigines can flay a person completely without killing him."

"Sounds jolly, but there will be no need." I lined up the instruments and hooked up the contacts. "Machines again. I shall keep him

unconscious and walk through his mind with spiked boots, even a worse torture in many ways. He will tell us what we need to know without ever knowing he has spoken. Afterward he is yours, you see."

"Thank you, no." The count raised disgusted hands. "Whenever one of them is killed the civilians suffer from reprisals. We will knock this one about a bit, rob him and dump him in an alley. Our treatment of him will resemble a simple crime."

"The best idea yet. Now I begin."

Going through that mind was like swimming in a sewer. Insanity is one thing—and he was certifiably insane—but outright evil is inexcusable. I had no problem extracting information, just in sorting it out. He wanted to speak his own language but finally settled for French and English. I plumbed, picked and probed and eventually discovered all I needed to know. Jules, my companion of the shaved head, was called in for the pleasurable sport of roughing up the subject and dumping him—stripped of his uniform—while the count and I returned gratefully to the unfinished carafe.

"Their headquarters appears to be in a place called St. Paul's. You know of it!"

"Sacrilège—they halt at nothing. The cathedral, the masterpiece of the great Sir Christopher Wren, it is here on the map."

"The one named He is there—and apparently all the machinery and instruments as well. But to reach it I must enter London. There is a good possibility that I might be able to pass the wall in his uniform since his body has the same radioactivity count as mine, a test they use to detect strangers. But there may be passwords, other means of identification, perhaps speaking in their own language. What is needed is a diversion. Do you have anyone with a knowledge of gunnery among your followers?"

"Certainly. Rene Dupont is a former major of artillery, a most knowledgeable soldier. And he is in London."

"Just the man. I am sure he will enjoy operating one of those high-powered guns. We shall capture a gunship before dawn. The bombardment will start at first light when the gates are opened. A certain number of shells through the gate, guardhouse and guard should be disconcerting. Then the boat will be abandoned and the gunners will escape on foot. This will be the responsibility of your men."

"It will be a pleasurable task

that I shall personally supervise. But where will you be?"

"Marching into the city with the troops, as I tried to do once before."

"Most hazardous! If you are too early you will be apprehended as you appear—or perhaps destroyed in the bombardment. Too late and the gate will be sealed against entry."

"So we'll have to time the operation accurately."

"I will send for the finest chronometers obtainable."

V

MAJOR DUPONT was a red-faced and gray-haired man with an impressive rotundity of belly. But he was energetic enough and knew his gunnery and was now consumed with a fierce passion to operate the invaders' incredible weapon. The former crew of the gunboat, including the look-outs, slept a deeper sleep than they had planned below decks while I worked out the mechanism of the recoilless cannon and explained it to the major. He grasped it instantly and beamed with fierce joy. After his experience with irregular cannon barrels, muzzle-loaded, uneven shot, slow-burning powder and all the rest of the

handicaps of his trade this weapon was a revelation to him.

"Charge, fuse, and projectile in the same casing—marvelous! And this lever swings open the breach?" he asked.

"Correct. Keep away from these vents when firing—the exhausted gas from the explosion comes out here, canceling the recoil. Use the open sights—the range is short. I imagine there will be no need to allow for windage at this distance and there will also be scarcely any projectile drop. The muzzle velocity is much greater than you are used to."

"Tell me more," he said, stroking the smooth steel.

Step two. The count would see to it that the ship was moved upstream before dawn and anchored to the embankment below London Bridge. I would see to it that I arrived on the bridge at the agreed time. The count's nautical chronometer was as big as a cabbage, handmade of brass and steel, and it clacked loudly. But he assured me of its accuracy and we set it from my atomic watch, as big as my fingernail and accurate to within one second a year. This was the last thing to be done and as I rose to leave he put out his hand and I took it.

"We will always be thankful for your aid," he said. "There is new

hope now among the men and I share their enthusiasm."

"It is I who should be thanking you for the help. Considering the fact that my winning might be the worst thing for you."

He dismissed that thought as unimportant—a brave man.

"In dying we win as you have explained. A world without these swine is victory enough. Even if we are not there to witness it. Do your duty."

I did. Trying to forget that the fate of worlds, civilization, whole peoples rested upon my actions. A slip, an accident, and it would be all over for everyone. There could therefore be no accidents. As mountain climbers do not look down and think about the drop below, I put thoughts of failure from my mind and tried to think of a joke to cheer myself up. None came to mind instantly so I thought instead about putting paid to He and his operation and this was cheering indeed. I looked at my watch. It was time to leave so I went quickly, without looking back. The streets were deserted; all honest men were home in bed. Behind me the first gray of approaching dawn touched the sky.

LONDON is full of dark alleys that provide ideal sites for

lurking. I lurked craftily within sight of London Bridge and watched as the first soldiers appeared. Some marched in step, some straggled, all looked tired. I was feeling tired myself so I sucked on a stimtab and kept an eye on my watch. Ideally I should be on the bridge when the firing began, far enough from the gate not to be hit, yet close enough to get through it during the excitement after the barrage. From my vantage point I timed various groups of soldiers crossing the bridge until I had a good estimate. The digits rolled by on my watch and at the proper moment I took a military brace with my shoulders and stepped out smartly.

“*Lortytort?*” a voice called out—and I realized it was calling to me. I had been so concerned with the time I had stupidly ignored the fact that He’s future-fiends would be crossing the bridge as well.

I waved, made an evil grimace and stepped out smartly. The man who had called out looked puzzled—then hurried after me. By my uniform he knew I was one of his gang, but one unfamiliar to him. He probably wanted to ask me how things were back in the home asylum. I wanted no conversation with him, particularly since I

didn’t speak his language. I hurried on—painfully aware of his footsteps behind me. Then I realized I was going too fast and at my present pace would reach the gate just in time to be blown up.

There was no time to curse my lack of awareness—my problem was just a matter of picking what kind of trouble I wanted. Getting myself blown up was a little too much to get involved with now. I could see that the gunboat was in position and that figures were on deck. Wonderful. I could already almost hear the explosions. With me in the middle of them. I would have to stop here—at the appointed spot. I did. Heavy footsteps hammered up behind me and a hand caught at my shoulder, spinning me about.

“*Lortilypu?*” he cried out. Then the expression on his face changed, his eyes widening, his mouth opening. “*Blivit!*” he shouted. He recognized me, perhaps from photographs.

“*Blivit* is the word,” I said and shot him in the neck with the narcotic needle gun I had palmed. Another cry of “*Blivit!*” came and one of his teammates pushed through the soldiers and I had to shoot him, too. This naturally interested everyone nearby. I heard startled shouts and saw a certain amount of weapon lift-



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ing. I put my back to the bridge parapet and wondered if I would have to shoot the entire French army.

I did not. The first shell, not too well aimed by the major of horse artillery, hit the bridge not ten meters from where I was standing.

The explosion was considerable and the air was filled with hurtling pieces of masonry and steel. I dropped—as did all the others, some permanently—and I took the opportunity to put needles into all the nearest soldiers who had witnessed my earlier shoot-out.

Back on the boat Dupont was learning to master his weapon and the next shell struck the city wall. There was much shouting and running about among the men on the bridge and I shouted and milled with the best of them, looking on with pleasure as the next shell whistled cleanly through the gate and blew up the guardhouse inside. Now most of the motion was away from the gate, as well it should be, so I dropped and wormed my way closer on my belly. Shells were now bursting in and around the gate and causing a satisfying amount of destruction. A quick look at my watch informed me that it was almost time for the barrage to lift. The signal would be a shell hitting the wall

far from the bridge. After this a few more shots would be fired for effect at targets of opportunity—but no more at the gate.

The shell struck the wall a good hundred meters downriver, blowing a neat hole in it. I jumped to my feet and ran.

WHAT a fine destructive mess. Wreckage and crumbled masonry were everywhere. Dust and the reek of high explosive hung in the air. If any survivors of the bombardment were left they had long since vanished. I scrambled over the rubble, slid down the other side and nipped around the first corner. The only witnesses to this unstealthy entrance was a couple watching from a doorway, English by their dress, who turned and ran as soon as they saw me. Despite my little tangle on the bridge the plan had worked perfectly.

The cannon on the river began firing again.

This was not part of any plan, not at all. Something had gone wrong. After the last shots my accomplices were to have retreated to shore and removed themselves to safety. Then two explosions sounded, almost at the same time. The cannon could not fire that fast.

Another gun was shooting.

The street I was on, Upper Thames Street, ran parallel to the wall. I was far enough from the bridge now for my presence not be associated with the action there—and a ladder led up to an observation platform on the top of the wall. Perhaps prudence should have dictated a single-minded continuation of my plans. But I have spent many years not listening to that particular voice and I was not prepared to start now. One quick look around—no one in sight—and up the ladder. The observation post was unoccupied. From it I had a perfect view of the action.

The major was still manning his gun, busily firing away at another gunboat that was coming up-river under full sail. The newcomer, even though handicapped by a moving platform, was more experienced and accurate with his weapon. A shell had already blown a great hole in the stern of my ally's boat and even as I watched another hit amidships and the gun was silent, its barrel in the air and the gunner gone. A figure ran across the dock and dropped into the crippled ship. I dug out my electronic telescope and trained it on the deck, knowing what I would see even before I put it to my eye.

The count had come to the aid of

his troops. But even as he jumped aboard, the major rose, blood running down his face, and manned the gun again. It swung about, aiming at the other boat, and hit it squarely with the next shot right at the waterline below the enemy weapon.

The second gun was silenced—the ship was sinking. When I looked back at the major again I saw that he had retrained his cannon and was firing at the bridge, at the enemy soldiers there. The count was loading for him. They both were smiling and seemed to be enjoying themselves. The firing continued, faster now, and I let myself back down the ladder.

Neither of them could be blamed—they knew exactly what they were doing. They were firing back at last at the enemy they had hated all these years, using a superior and highly destructive weapon. Both would stay there in action until they were cut down. Perhaps they wanted it that way. If this sacrifice were to have any value at all I had to get on with my own job.

I had studied the count's map. My immediate course lay along Duck's Foot Land to Cannon Street and then left. People were about now, frightened civilians hurrying by, soldiers marching

on the double in the opposite direction. No one paid any attention to me at all.

And there, up ahead at the end of the street, the great bulk of the walls and dome rose—unmistakably St. Paul's.

The end of another road was near. My final meeting with He.

VI

I WAS scared. A man is either a liar—or mad—who claims never to have felt fear. I have been touched by it often enough to recognize its smell, but never have I felt the iron hand clamping down as it did now. Ice water in the veins, a hammering in the heart, a rooted feeling in the feet. With a decided effort I grabbed my brain by the throat, no mean feat that, and gave it a good shaking.

Speak, brain, I commanded. Why this sudden case of acute chickenitis? Why the yellow stripe right down the back as far as the heels? Body and brain, we have been in tight spots before, even narrower ones. But we bulled through and came out on the other side. Usually victors. What is new here?

The answer came back quickly. As a rustproof rodent I had penetrated behind the walls of society, doing it on my own and stand-

ing or falling on my own. Adventure, rah-rah. But now too much was riding on the bet—too many people's lives depended upon my actions. The future survival of the entire galaxy might be at stake. It was almost unbelievable.

"Make it unbelievable," I muttered, digging in my medikit. If I kept dwelling on what was at stake I would take no risks, probably take no action. I have never resorted to artificial morale before, but there is a first time for everything. I carried berserker pills as a sort of amulet—I knew they were there if I ever needed them, therefore I had never needed them. Until now. I clicked open the case and brushed the dust off an innocent looking capsule.

"Get out there and fight, Jim," I said and swallowed the thing.

They are outlawed everywhere and for good reasons. Not because they are habit forming to a great degree, both physically and psychologically, but for social reasons. Inside the gelatin capsule lies a specific form of madness, a compound that dissolves the conscience and morality of civilized man. SuperId takes over. No morals, conscience—or fear—survive it. Nothing remains but a great chunk of ego and the sure knowledge of might and right, di-

vine permission to do anything and not to feel concern or fear while doing it. Politicians loaded on berserkerite have toppled regimes and controlled worlds. Athletes have broken all sports records, often destroying themselves or their opponents in the process. Not nice stuff.

Very nice stuff. I had one fleeting instant of conscience and realization of change as the chemicals took hold of my brain, but it passed even as it began. "I have come for you, He," I said, smiling with genuine joy.

This was power unlimited, the most exhilarating sensation I had ever experienced, a cleansing wind blowing out all the dusty corners of my brain. Do what you want Jim, what you will because you are the only power in the world that really counts. How blind I had lived for years. Cramped by small moralities, puny affections for others, destructive other-orientated love. How crippled I had been.

I love myself because I am God.

At last I understood the meaning of God that the old religions were always mumbling about.

I am I, the only power in the universe. And He is in that building ahead, thinking with mortal foolishness that he can best me, stop me, even kill me. Now we shall see

what happens to idiot plans like his . . .

A STROLL around the premises. A solid enough structure, no apparent guards, undoubtedly loaded with detection apparatus. A subtle or secret approach would not be wise. The only advantage I could have was surprise, that and the ability to be absolutely ruthless. I was well armed, a walking engine of death, and no one would stop me. Entry would be simple enough, others were going in and out constantly, all in the same uniform I was wearing. I sensed a buzz and a disturbed whine to this beehive at the present. They did not like the attack on the gate. I had to strike now while they were disturbed. All devices at the ready and instantly available I completed my leisurely circuit of the building and started up the white stone steps at its front.

The cathedral was immense, appearing even larger with all the pews and religious furniture cleared away. I stalked down the length of the long nave as though I owned it, weapons ready. The nave was deserted and all the activity was concentrated at the far end in the apse where the altar usually stood. In its place loomed an ornate throne.

He sat on it. Arrogant with power, great red body leaning forward to issue orders to his assistants below. A long table reached across the transept, littered with maps and papers and surrounded by brilliantly uniformed officers. They seemed to be taking their orders from a man in a simple blue uniform coat. He was short and wore a black lick of hair across his forehead. From descriptions I recognized Napoleon—passing on instructions from He as I had expected. I knew I was smiling as I shifted my fingertips closer to my armament.

A familiar crackling of light caught my attention from the secondary apse off to the right and my smile broadened. The gleaming machinery of a time helix was stuffed in there, surrounded by technicians bent over their tasks. They would be dead soon, like everyone else here. And I would have temporal transportation out of this barbarian era. I would have to leave a small atomic grenade behind me when I left. The end was just in sight.

No one paid the slightest attention to me as I came up to the table. I would have to use sleep gas first since this would work on them all at the same time. Plenty of time to kill the slaves after I had removed their master.

One concussion grenade, two thermite grenades. I triggered them with my thumb and threw them, one—two—three, in high arcs into He's lap. While they were still in the air I rolled handful after handful of gas grenades down the table under the shocked faces of the officers. The grenades were still hissing and banging as I spun about and used my needle gun—I didn't want to injure the controls—to shoot down the technicians around the time helix.

It was all over in a matter of seconds. Quiet descended as the last man fell. Before turning back I hurled grenades down the length of the nave so that anyone entering would walk into the gas cloud. Then I looked at He.

Lovely. A roaring pillar of fire with something in its core that might have been a man. The throne burned as well and the column of greasy smoke roiled up towards the great dome above.

"You are beaten—" I shouted leaning forward across the table to get a better look. He would not be surviving this attack.

Napoleon lifted his head from the table and sat up.

"Don't be foolish," he said.

I wasted no time in thought but tried to kill him. But he was ready and fired before I did with a tube-like weapon concealed in his

palm. Fire washed across my face, then it was numb. My body went lifeless, died, though I could hear and see. I dropped face down onto the table. I could not feel Napoleon's hands when he rolled me over but I could see him looking down at me, smiling. I could hear him roaring with victorious laughter that held more than an echo of madness.

Some comprehension must have reached my eyes.

"That is right," he shouted. "I am He. You have lost. You have burned, destroyed that fine organic mechanism whose only function was to deceive you. It was a trap for you, everything here, even the existence of this world, this loop in time, has no function other than trapping you. Did you forget so quickly that a body is merely a shell for me, the eternal He? My brain has mastered death and lives on. Now in this imitation of a mad emperor. He never knew what real madness was. But you have lost—"

THIS was a temporary setback. I suppose that normally I would have felt defeated, afraid, angry, suffered under some kind of useless emotion. Now I simply waited for the opportunity to kill He again. My berserker con-

dition found the lack of results boring—after two tries He was still alive. I resolved that the third would be the final one.

He bent and searched me with brutal thoroughness, ripping my clothing into shreds, pulling off devices that adhered to my skin, taking the knife from my ankle, the gun from my wrist, the tiny grenades from my hair. Within seconds every ready weapon I had was gone. The few devices left were well out of reach. The search over he discarded me, flinging my limp body face upward onto the table.

"I have prepared for this moment." He told me.

I heard the rattle of chains as he picked up my wrists and snapped heavy metal fetters about them. As the cuffs closed there was a brief flash of light as the ends welded together and I saw the instant blistered redness of my skin where it touched the metal. Not important—I felt nothing.

He pushed a needle into my wrist.

Feeling began to return, first to my hands—great pain in the wrists—and then to my arms. A lot of pain seemed to be associated with the return of sensation. I ignored it, although spasms shook my body uncontrollably. In the end I shook myself off the table,

falling heavily to the floor. He bent and picked me up at once, dragging me across the width of the great cathedral. His strength, even in the disguise of this small body, was tremendous.

In the brief instant I had lain on the floor I had grabbed something with my fingers. I did not know what it was—it felt quite small and metallic—but it remained clenched tightly in my fist.

A solid waist-high metal pillar stood about five meters from the time-helix controls. This, too, was waiting for me. He held my wrists apart and laid the chain that joined them into a groove in the top of the pillar. Another flash of light welded the chain to the solid metal. He released me and I swayed but did not fall. Sensation and control were returning to my body and I mastered it as he went to the controls and made some adjustments.

The vast cathedral was silent. We were alone except for the huddled bodies.

“I have won,” he yelled suddenly, doing a little dance step. He pointed to the coiled form of the time helix and laughed out loud. “Do you realize that you are now in a loop of time that does not exist, that I called into being to trap you, that will vanish as soon as I leave it?”

“I suspected that. Napoleon lost in our text books.”

“He won here. I gave him the weapons to conquer the world. Then I killed him when my new body was ready. This loop in time came into being when he died and its existence created a barrier in time that will go down as soon as it ceases to exist. When I leave this will happen, but not instantly, that would be too easy for you. I want to think of you here—alone, knowing that you have lost and that your future will never exist. There is a time fixator on this building. It will be here after London and the entire world are gone, perhaps longer than you. You may die a difficult death—or live an even more difficult life—before it shuts off. I have won.”

He turned to the controls again. I opened my fist to see what weapon I had in my palm that might defeat him at this final moment. It was a small brass cylinder that weighed no more than a few grams. One end had small holes punched in it and when I turned it over fine white sand came out. A sander, used for drying the writing ink on papers. I might have wished for a better weapon but this would have to do.

“I leave,” He said, actuating the mechanism.

“What about your men here?”

"Mad slaves. They vanish with you, having served my purpose. I have an entire world of them waiting to welcome my return. Soon there will be many worlds—soon they will all be mine."

I could add nothing much to that. He sauntered across the flagstones, a monster in the body of that tiny man, touched his hand to the glowing end of the time helix and was instantly engulfed by its cold green flame.

"All mine," he said.

"I don't think so."

I JUGGLED the sander in my hand, testing its weight, measuring the distance to the controls. My chains permitted some movement. The settings of the time scale of the helix were a bank

of keys—a number of them were depressed now. If I could push one more of them down the setting would be changed and He would arrive at an unscheduled time and place—perhaps not arrive at all. I swung my hand as much as my fetters permitted, estimating the distance, the trajectory the little tube must follow.

He must have guessed what I intended. He began to howl with insane rage, pulling at the time field that neatly held him tight to the end of the helix. Coldly I judged the distance until I was sure I had it right.

I tossed the sander in a high arc.

It rose, glinting brightly in a shaft of sunlight from a stained glass window, and arched down.

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Striking on the bank of keys, then falling off to rattle to the floor.

He's enraged cries cut off as the time helix released and He vanished from sight. At the same moment the light changed, dimming to dusk. Outside the windows was the grayness I had seen before during the time attack on the laboratory that had started everything. London, the world outside no longer existed, not in this particular part of time and space. Only the cathedral continued being, held briefly by the time fixator.

Had He won? I felt the first touch of worry—the effects of the drug had to be wearing off. I looked hard, but it was almost impossible to see the indicator dials in the dim light. Had one of them moved just before the helix was actuated? I could not be sure. And it didn't really matter, not to me here. Whether the future was hell or a paradise of peace could not affect me. With the return of emotions I felt a desire to know if my world would ever be. Would there be a Special Corps and would my Angelina some day be born? I would never know. I tugged sharply at the chains.

They held fast.

The end. End of everything. The emotions that were returning

were only the blackest and most depressed but I could not help it. End.

While I was at the depths, feeling only the most profound self-pity, the sound began. A distant whine on the edge of audibility, so weak I would never have heard it had it not broken an absolute silence. It grew and grew, as annoying as an insect making me aware of it although I did not wish to be aware of anything except my misery. In the end it was quite loud, coming from empty space somewhere high beneath the dome. I looked up despite my lack of interest just as there was the loud bang of displaced air.

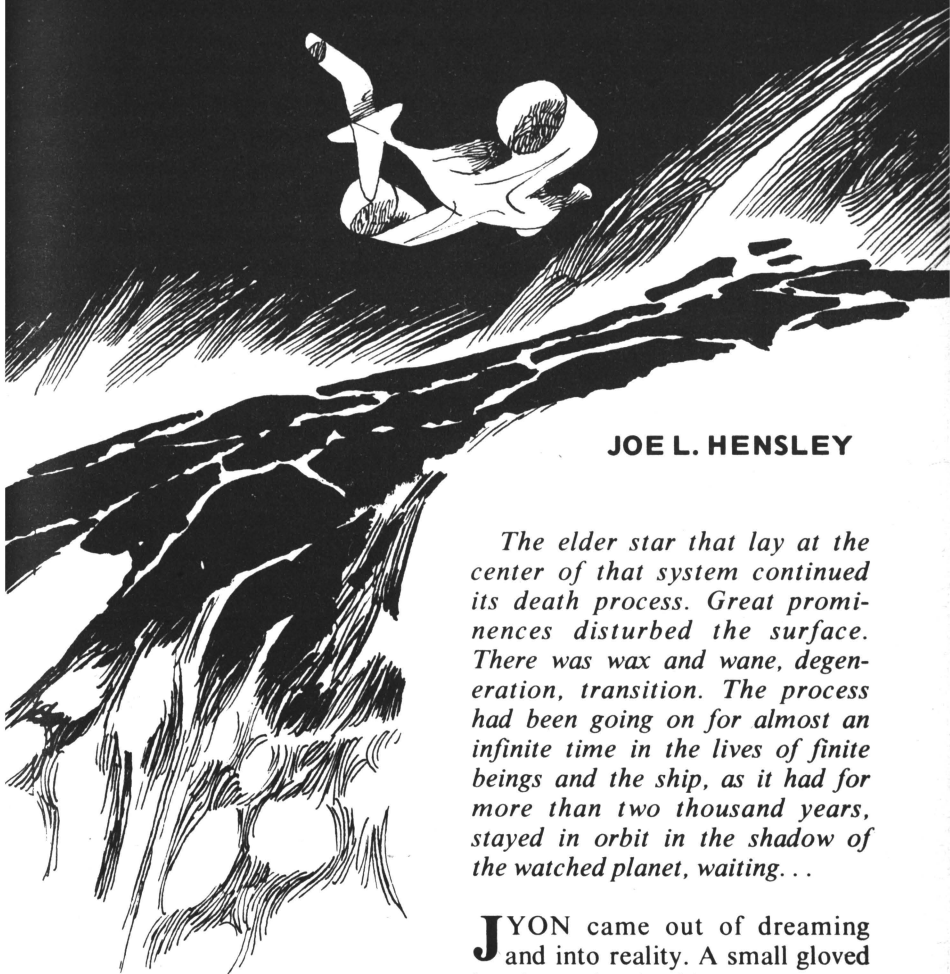
A figure appeared in the darkness above, someone in a spacesuit. Wearing a grav-chute, because he drifted down slowly and landed in front of me. I was stunned and ready for almost anything when he opened the dark helmet of his spacesuit.

Ready for almost anything other than the fact that he was not a he.

"Get rid of that silly chain," Angelina said. "You always manage to get into trouble as soon as I leave you alone. You're coming back with me right now and that is all there is to it."

I had nothing at all to say. This time the last word was surely hers.●

TIME PATROL



The ship orbited endlessly, and endlessly men hoped . . .

JOE L. HENSLEY

The elder star that lay at the center of that system continued its death process. Great prominences disturbed the surface. There was wax and wane, degeneration, transition. The process had been going on for almost an infinite time in the lives of finite beings and the ship, as it had for more than two thousand years, stayed in orbit in the shadow of the watched planet, waiting. . .

JYON came out of dreaming and into reality. A small gloved hand was shaking him.

"Subleader Jyon," an insistent voice said and repeated, "Subleader Jyon."

"All right," he said, reluctantly awake. He had been having a good dream of home and full rations of cool water to bathe in. A dream where loneliness no longer existed.

The voice that had awakened him was soft and female and Jyon recognized it. Her name was Carns and she was pleasant to look at. She was a medical assistant.

"The doctor requests your presence," she said urgently. "The Leader fails. Now, please."

Jyon scrambled from near nakedness into his tunic while she watched without any evident embarrassment. The tunic fit him loosely. He had lost flesh. All of the crew had. The relief ship was overdue. There was talk that it would never come, had never been dispatched. Soon the rations would have to be cut again.

Dutifully he followed the girl down metallic corridors that smelled of oil and age. He thought she was aware that he watched her and not displeased. She wore no man's mark and so was unattached. It was long since he had paired. He had lost the desire when Darl died in a sudden shifting of the crust of the black world below. Now there seemed to be too many thoughts he needed to hide from others, things he could never share. The ship was his. Conflict and bickering over possible courses of action grew in feroci-

ty. He had to make the final decisions. That was the custom and the law. It seemed better to face that duty without the additional involvement of pairing and sharing.

Leader Mzel had been injured on the same disastrous day that had claimed the life of Darl. The sudden land shift had crushed Mzel and left him speechless, comatose much of the time and without reason. Jyon had assumed command of the strife-ridden ship.

The doctor waited.

"He's conscious," he said softly. "I opened his skull and relieved the pressure. He's very weak and presents a poor chance." He shrugged, unwilling to commit himself. "He may die—he may live. I think there is now some understanding within him of what is said." The doctor watched Jyon through eyes that had seen much and pitied all. "The law says that you lead if he dies. Leaders are supposed to pass on their secrets to those who succeed them. I would talk to you about the course we must take. But first Leader Mzel may have things he wishes to tell you."

"I understand."

JYON entered the sickroom. Mzel was strapped to a pallet, eyes open, full of pain. Still, Jyon saw that those eyes were now able to follow him.

HE SAT beside the pallet and took the older man's hand. "You are better," he said comfortably.

Leader Mzel watched him, then let his eyes turn away to the table near the pallet. Jyon looked that way also. On the table was the buckle that Mzel had always worn, the buckle of the brotherhood. Mzel was of the brotherhood. Jyon was not.

Mzel nodded with a tiny motion and his eyes returned to Jyon.

"Take," he said softly.

Jyon picked up the belt and buckle. Cunningly worked into the metal were the familiar figures of the Twins, life flask held between them. Jyon clasped the buckle, sensing that the older man wanted him to do so.

Mzel's mouth opened again and Jyon leaned close, listening. One word came and it was so low it was more imagined than heard.

"Relief?"

Jyon shook his head. "Not yet, Leader. We still wait. Many now desire to abandon the watch, drive the ship toward home." He nodded, not afraid to muse in front of this other man who had known command. "No reason other than the ancient rules why we shouldn't. The ship theoretically could make it home if we left soon. If we wait too much longer we might have insufficient rations for the trip." He looked down and again tried to read Mzel's eyes.

"Nothing is left down there. The surface is now extremely dangerous. A poisoned planet, its atmosphere burned away, a worthless place. The disapproval of this watch grows among the crew."

He leaned forward again, watching the listening, but he could not be sure of the word Mzel spoke.

Was it, *Stay?*

Jyon shook his head. Much lay beyond his understanding. No Leader had ever been lost before to his knowledge, save through orderly process. But command was now his. The ship had been here for a score of centuries. The directives of the Twin Brotherhood said it was to stay here, no matter what happened. But that surely could be interpreted to mean that the ship was to stay with relief. Not even the most disapproving of the Twin Brotherhood could expect otherwise. Yet when his own relief party had been in training Jyon had known from idle talk that there had been indecision about whether to send them. The maintenance of the ships taxed the makeshift civilization that sputtered and sparked now on the home planet. The civilization had arisen since the last time of chaos more than two thousand years before. Jyon thought that the ships were relics of a time older than that—they were all but indestructible.

A new dark age approached. Wars had broken out between the

principal cities and only the Brotherhood maintained what peace remained. An uneasy time.

He watched the older man who had now stopped trying to talk. Leader Mzel fought only to live, to exist. In a while the tortured eyes glazed over and Mzel sank back into unconsciousness.

The doctor waited outside.

"I think he sleeps," Jyon said. He held the belt and buckle. "He wished me to take this."

The doctor said, "We monitor him constantly. His injuries were most severe." He eyed Jyon. "Is there time to talk with me now?"

Jyon knew then that the doctor held no hope for Mzel. He sighed. "Speak."

The doctor lifted a hand that trembled slightly. "We must proceed home soon. I now have too many patients suffering from nervous disorders—an alarming increase. If we continue to wait for relief I mistrust the collective sanity of the ship. The times were too troubled when we left. The crew no longer believes that relief is on the way and so there is no end in sight for them."

Jyon asked, "Would you have us leave now and risk the perils of a long voyage and have relief come after our leaving?"

"My advice is that we return," the doctor said shortly. "If you wish, for your records and to absolve your conscience and to clear

you with the Twin Brotherhood, which presumably still governs at home, I shall be happy to reduce that advice to writing."

"Perhaps that would be best, Doctor. I haven't yet made up my mind about what course to follow. The directives seem clear. This ship is to stand watch here. Perhaps Mzel, as a member of the Brotherhood, had some inkling of our purpose. I know not. I only know that this watch has lasted as long as our history—it reaches back to the dark years. Perhaps we are to rescue artifacts that belch from time to time from the tortured matter below—perhaps we are here as chroniclers of destruction or even as potential rescuers of some possible survivors hidden deep beneath the tormented crust of the world below us."

"There can be no survivors. None has ever been found in the history of the ship," the doctor said. He shook his head. "We serve no purpose here except to be in at the cremation, perhaps for some dark reason of the Brotherhood. And how do we know now that the Brotherhood still maintains law at home?"

"Write out your recommendations, Doctor," Jyon said without emotion. "I'll consider them. I can promise no more for now."

HE LEFT the man. It was almost time for watch, but there

was time enough to visit the Room of Ages. He walked there slowly. The room was dim and vast. The vaulted ceiling was scanty illuminated by a reproduction of the home sun and the planets that wheeled around it. He found a vacant place and contemplated.

The room was not a place of religion, although many used it as such. The Brotherhood was not a thing of priests, but of men—men who kept the laws, maintained the ships, studied what remained of the old books. Men who tried. The Room of Ages was a part of the Brotherhood rule. And because he was not completely without cynicism Jyon knew that it had been placed here mainly for those who attributed godhood to the Twins, for whom no overt worship was solicited.

The four walls of the room were covered by enormous pictures. On the rear wall was Stac and Small. He was in appearance much like Jyon himself. The clothes were different, but the eyes that looked back at Jyon were known eyes. On the opposite wall was Givan the Great. He differed markedly from Stac. He was tall and there seemed to be no hair on his body. Some men of the Twin Brotherhood at home shaved theirs to set themselves apart. Givan had too many joints in his feet and fingers and his eyes were set so deep that all one really saw were shadows.

On the back wall, between the brothers, was the flask of life. It was a huge, black, bottle-shaped thing, curiously made.

The front wall of the room was made in the fashion of the buckle Mzel had entrusted to Jyon. There Stac and Givan again stood, arms entwined about each other in friendship, the flask held jointly by them.

The legends said that the Twins had once lived this way. But no man of Jyon's race who now lived had seen one who looked like Givan. Jyon wondered what a friendship like that would have been worth. The drawing was from one of the old statues that had come through the time of darkness. Jyon had once seen an original in one of the halls of the Brotherhood at home. Stac was cast in light metal and Givan in metal of dark green.

The legends grew dim. Once men had risen from the mud—once they had journeyed to the far stars. That was what remained of the legends. Once there had been friends around mankind—once men had not been lonely and lost.

ON WATCH he replaced Gyden, now second in command and a former friend. When command had come to Jyon somehow friendships had withered.

"What news of the Leader?" Gyden asked sourly. He had

probably already heard, Jyon thought.

"Perhaps improved. He understands again. He can speak."

The other nodded and watched him cautiously and Jyon thought he was going to be proselyted again, but Gyden forebore. Gyden's opinion that they should attempt return was already well known and widely circulated within the ship. He was the acknowledged leader of the return group, which Jyon believed grew in numbers daily.

Jyon formally relieved and then watched the planet below through the scanners. Around him delicate instruments charted and measured, cameras took continuous pictures.

The swollen sun had cooked the life from what had once most probably been a fairly pleasant place. First atmosphere and oceans had boiled and burned away, then massive quakes had shaken the stricken planet. Now the surface was unstable and highly dangerous to approach. Darl and Mzel were not the only casualties. The ship had lost a total of nineteen persons—twenty if Mzel died. That was out of a population of less than four hundred.

Jyon watched and waited and wondered why he watched, why so many generations had persistently watched. Perhaps it was only because the watch had somehow begun and now no one, in-

cluding the Brotherhood, knew how to end it. In a way the ships were the Brotherhood.

Perhaps was a thousand, thousand reasons that no one knew now. The ship stayed because the ship stayed. The reasons might be good—but they were lost.

Once there had been cities below and it was possible that beings somewhat like Jyon's own people had lived in those cities. A popular belief aboard the ship was that Jyon's own people might once have colonized the world below—in a forgotten age—and now kept watch to retain some vestige of sovereignty, for the legends had it that once the race had been warlike and proud.

Around Jyon other members of the watch came and went in endless routine. He could feel eyes on him, curious eyes, angry eyes, even eyes that seemed to plot rebellion. He had a strong feeling that when he made his decision about return that decision might not be the final one.

He had therefore taken some precautions.

In the Leader's cabin, which he now occupied at least temporarily, were secret primary controls for the ship. Mzel, perhaps with a premonition of disaster, had shown these controls to him in the good times before rations had shortened. Jyon had never shown them to Gyden. The cabin could be sealed off so that unau-

thorized entry would be time-consuming and difficult. He hoped necessity would not force him to last resorts, but the ship could be conned and the bleak world below scanned independently from that cabin. Without control of the cabin no one could immediately take the ship from orbit and compute it into a course toward the home sun. Only in time and with much effort could the cabin control be overridden.

Halfway into the watch a thing Jyon had come to dread happened. The scanners found a variance. The coordinates were called out and half a hundred pairs of eyes moved in and over and scanned that variance, compared it with pictures taken on the last pass of the area. It seemed to be no mere crust upheaval. Something was down there that had not been there before.

Jyon was a veteran of a hundred similar happenings. The rules were simple enough. A scout should be launched to investigate. That rule had begun to cost lives. The odds for survival upon landing were poor.

And yet it seemed to Jyon that if he broke routine that routine was finished for all time. So he would go—but he would avoid landing.

HE ORDERED the waiting crew: "To Scout Three. I will command. Temporary command here to the next in line."

That meant someone would call Gyden out of his sleep. Jyon assembled his exploratory crew of ten, took the scout down and skimmed the surface of the planet. Close in, in the darkness, all that was revealed to sight and instruments was an enormous mound of matter. A *thing* had pushed its way out of the planet's interior and loomed now, still hideously hot from the sunward side. Jyon held the ship above it and calculated chances. There really seemed no easy, safe way to get the ship down even if he wanted to land. Instead he played powerful beams of light upon the earth-vomited artifact and had pictures made. They showed a long vaguely formed body partially thrust through the crust. The lines of the thing had uniformity and seemed more than amorphous—perhaps manufactured—perhaps a tunnel belched out from far below by those terrible underground pressures. It was much too large for removal. What he saw seemed to be only a part of it with much more underground. It seemed to be of metal, dulled and deeply colored by long interment in the earth.

In the ship above were books showing what had come up from the ground over the long watch, but no one was familiar with them any more, for the ship's scribe was among the dead. It was possible that what was being unearthed had appeared before and had

been investigated. Jyon hesitated, still studying pictures. He allowed time to pass as the thing below moved toward the sun side. There the scout ship could not follow. The sun was too hot, the coolants in the tiny ship too inefficient.

As he watched the crust shifted agonizingly again and more of the long body appeared. It widened and seemed to be wider still in that portion yet concealed within the planet.

A patch of white heat broke from the bottom of the gray sky. The sun.

Reluctantly Jyon ordered return. He would study the object further from the ship.

WHEN he boarded he was met by four men. They waited upon him warily, their manner determined but respectful. Their spokesman had hard eyes that shone now with purpose.

He said, "Leader Gyden has taken command of the ship with the purpose of returning us home. We have been sent to attend you."

Jyon smiled.

"Good," he said.

The four watched him without return smiles.

Jyon said, "I'm glad the decision is no longer mine. I now express my sympathies."

"I see," the spokesman said, seeming to relax a little.

"Take me to my cabin, please," Jyon said. "I'm tired after the long shift."

They conferred quietly and then took him there. They made a cursory inspection of the room, found nothing to cause them concern, left and closed the door. Jyon waited for a moment or two and then carefully and quietly locked the door from the inside, turned the huge bolts that Mzel had shown him, and pushed down the secondary shields that secured the room from anything but the most determined and continuous onslaught.

He opened the concealed wall panel as Mzel had shown him. Then he locked in the set of over-riding controls so that the centuries-long vigil around the doomed world below would continue. The course had not yet been changed, but he imagined that Gyden was plotting a new one in the central control room.

The cabin held a tiny scanner. He set its coordinates so that he could monitor the new object when the region came around again. Then he slept. His sleep was exhausted and without dreams.

He awoke to a muffled banging on the door. He smiled to himself. Gyden's people must have discovered that their controls were inoperative and finally deduced that he might have something to do with it. They were working on the door. But if the specifications Mzel had shown

him were right the men would work a long time before they gained entrance.

He turned on the voice system at the control panel and set it for all outlets.

"This is Acting Leader Jyon," he said. "I am controlling the ship from my cabin."

Gyden's voice came back quickly: "Open the door for us, Jyon. We voted while you were on scout. Many more wished to return home than wished to stay and hope for relief."

He fell silent for a moment, waiting for Jyon to speak, but Jyon said nothing.

Gyden's voice returned, full of conviction: "If we stay here we will all die."

"Then we'll die," Jyon said simply. "Leader Mzel said we should stay. There is a reason. Our race has endured the high cost of maintaining the watch for too long for there not to be a reason."

"No," Gyden said. "Now open the door for us. Otherwise we will not furnish you with food and will cut off your cabin water."

"We need not talk further," Jyon said frigidly.

THE cabin contained the record books that listed and portrayed the artifacts taken and observed from the world below. There were rows of the books, huge pages of pictures and other pages covered with the spidery writing

of past ship's scribes. The current book was in the central control room. These were the books of the past. He had lacked time to examine them. Now he had plenty of time.

The pictures were of bits of machinery, delicate pottery shards, metallic instruments, building blocks, shaped metals and the rest of the flotsam and jetsam of a long-vanished race. But there didn't seem to be anything remotely like what Jyon had seen on the last trip down.

The record books were fascinating. They gave only minor hints at the reasons for the long vigil, reasons Jyon had already deduced and cast aside. Primarily the books chronicled results.

With the books it was easier to imagine that a sentient race had lived on the grim world below and he could even imagine what that race had been like—intelligent, mechanized, complex, even lovers of beauty.

Jyon read and argued with himself about the sun. It seemed positive that it had begun its final death process long before the watch ship appeared in the area and surely all life had vanished an eon before the watch had begun. The records seemed to bear that out for nowhere was pictured any artifact that did not show the effects of both heat and age. When had those who had lived below discovered what was going to hap-

pen to their sun? Where had they fled?

Men outside still worked at the room, attempting to gain entrance, but the attempts seemed sporadic now. Perhaps they were ready to give up and seek other alternatives. Perhaps they would find a way around the locked controls. Jyon no longer really cared as the days fled past.

Below the ship's orbit the huge body that had erupted from the ground lay quietly, barely disturbed by the almost constant tremors. Jyon watched it for a few days, then moved to other pursuits, leaving the scanner coordinated to it.

His new interest was hunger. Before he had secluded himself the ship's meals had been skimpy, providing barely enough nutrient value to sustain life. Now there was, of course, nothing.

The water tap continued to run. He had filled all the containers he had been able to find after the threat, but as yet had had no need to resort to them.

He hungered.

The mirror let him see his face become old and gaunt with a suddenness that was frightening. In a very short time movement became perilous for he was constantly lightheaded and dizzy.

The days passed and finally pain ceased to be associated with his hunger. It became a mental thing, a knowing that someplace

there was food. That place became more distant every day so that as the time quickly passed the place of food became almost an imaginary thing. Despite the voices that came from the speaker, cajoling him to open the door, he no longer believed that opening the door would bring food. Existence in the world he built of his hunger had to be more complicated than that.

AFTER many days he recognized Gyden's voice as it came over the speaker. He listened to it stolidly from his pallet.

"We have completed bypassing your controls, Leader Jyon. Mzel is dead and you are now leader. We ask you to open your door, remove the shields and help us return. Your conduct has been honorable, but surely you have done all you need to do. None of us desires your death. The medical staff fears you will die if you don't receive food soon. In a very short time we will leave the orbit here and proceed on a course to home. I ask not that you open to us until then, but when you see that the orbit has changed then open to us, so that you may live and not die."

Jyon crawled from his pallet toward the controls. Cautiously he worked them, but nothing happened. Gyden had not lied.

He peered into the scanner. The orbit appeared still to be the same. He concentrated on what

lay below and a wave of sickness and dizziness came and he looked away and then determinedly back. Mzel's belt and buckle lay next to the scanner, where he had discarded them.

Nothing had changed below.

It was only that the great body that had come from the earth below reminded him of something, made him look down again.

This scanner was smaller than those in the main control room. He rose to his feet and operated the shields. Then, clumsily, he threw back the massive bolts of the door. Two guards greeted him in friendly fashion, but their eyes mirrored shock at his appearance.

"Take me now to the main control room," he said urgently. He tottered to them and felt strong arms hold his own weak ones and guide him.

Gyden and two dozen others were working in the control room. All sound stopped as Jyon entered.

"Before you leave orbit," Jyon said in a voice that was almost lost, "please try to open that artifact below. It seems to me to be like a great bottle—a flask—I beg—please—"

He lost all control and blackness came.

In his dreams he saw food.

In the dreams Mzel still commanded and Darl lived. It was how he recognized it as a dream.

WHEN he came out of it he was in the infirmary. Needles jutted from his arm and his breathing was aided by a respirator.

The female Carns watched him and smiled when he looked at her.

"You will be all right now," she said.

"Where are we?" he asked and the question made bitter memories return. "How long have I been—"

She touched his lips with a quieting finger. "Not too much talk now. We still remain in orbit. The doctor and Subleader Gyden have been waiting for a long time to talk with you, Leader Jyon."

She moved away and all was quiet for a while. When she returned she brought the doctor and Gyden. Gyden walked softly, as if afraid that the sound of his feet would bring harm to Jyon. The doctor moved close to the pallet.

"You will be quiet and listen," he ordered Jyon. "I command here and you came within reach of death." He looked away and then back. "You have started a great argument about what we found down there by your insistence that we stay." He smiled gently.

Gyden nodded seriously. "Those who have made the Twins a religious thing say that we have found the flask of life. Others say that we've found the treasures that our civilization lost in the times of chaos, those things that once

made us great. Inside that thing down there, insulated completely against the heat, guarded by metals we only dimly understand, we found a rich treasure of films and books, machines and drawings, knowledge—even history. An infinity of things that will enrich our race, give our people purpose.”

The doctor smiled again. “Yesterday we counseled with the other ship’s leaders and theorized. Only many years of study will give us real answers, but we can still attempt to understand. We believe that once we, and perhaps others, lived on that world below many thousand of years before this watch began. Perhaps it was our ancestral home. When the sun began its change our people built in panic and we fled to our present home. Perhaps we lost those things we have found below over the years of darkness, so that when the watch began it was only known that we had once lived there and that something might be found that would be of benefit. Perhaps the ones who set the first watch knew that the thing we found existed, or at least hoped it existed.”

Gyden shook his head. “There are great paintings, statuary. Tiny films show a million million things we have lost.”

“Perhaps this we have found is the sole reason for the Brotherhood. Only a belief—a reli-

gion—could have survived the violent passage of time,” the doctor said.

Gyden leaned forward, his face earnest. “Still we hunger. Those on the home world now also hunger for knowledge of this. The times of darkness draw nigh there. Please say to us that we should return.”

They watched him.

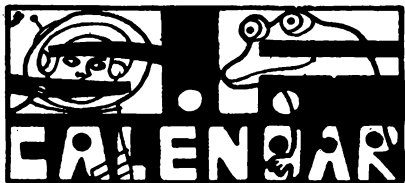
Jyon raised his head weakly. “Were there paintings and statues in what you recovered such as those we now call the Twins?”

The doctor nodded. “Many such. That is why I said perhaps we once occupied this place with others.”

“Then calculate our food. See if anything in what we have found can be used for new food. We must stay as long as we can.” He remembered the drawings, the buckle, the statue he’d seen long ago.

Those two in the statue had found something worth more than mere knowledge, mere treasure, mere learning. It could be seen in their carved faces, in the arms held tight in friendship.

“We are here,” Jyon said slowly. “Once we fled and lost. Perhaps those others remained. Now let us await and watch with all we have for as long as we can. We have found our flask of knowledge. Let us wait to see if we now can find those who helped us to attain and hold it.”



April 14-16, 1972. BOSKONE. At the Statler-Hilton Hotel Boston, Massachusetts. Registration: \$3.00 in advance, \$4.00 at the door. For information: NESFA, Box G; MIT Branch Station, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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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.

●

January 21-23, 1972. STAR TREK CON. At the Statler-Hilton Hotel, New York City. Registration: \$2.50 in advance, \$3.50 at the door. For information: Albert Schuster, 31-78 Crescent Street, Long Island City, New York 11106.

●

February 18-20, 1972. THE BALTIMORE SCIENCE FANTASY CON. Guest-of-Honor: Gordon R. Dickson. Advance registration: \$2.00. For information: Ted Pauls, 1448 Meridene Drive, Baltimore, Maryland 21239.

●

March 31-April 2, 1972. LUNACON. At the Statler-Hilton Hotel, New York City. Registration: \$3.00 in advance, \$5.00 at the door. For information: Devra Langsam, 250 Crown Street, Brooklyn, New York.

July 12-16, 1972. EUROCON 1: First European Science Fiction Convention 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.

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September 1-4, 1972. L.A. CON: 30th World Science Fiction Convention. At the International Hotel, 6211 West Century Blvd., Los Angeles, California 90045. Guest-of-Honor: Frederik Pohl. Fan Guests-of-Honor: Robert and Juanita Coulson. Membership: \$8.00 attending, \$6.00 supporting. For information: L.A. Con, P.O. Box 1, Santa Monica, California 90406.



SHELTERING DREAM

*Duncan had to choose
between two realities.
Yet in the end there
was no choice . . .*

DORIS PISERCHIA

THEY had put him into a cavity of steel—windowless, no bars, nothing even to tell where the dim light was coming from. There was nothing here besides his own bruised, bewildered, outraged self. If the cell had been

padding he would have known they thought him insane. The walls were smooth steel. No, the thing was a jail, all right, and by God somebody was going to pay for this outrage before the day was out.

He listened anxiously. All he could hear was his own breathing.

He sat down again on the cold floor. The sensible thing to do was wait. Calmly. Not let them know he was afraid. They would enjoy his fear. That clod, that stone-faced blockhead, who had shoved him in here was a sadist who probably thought he was a nobody. Well, he would show him. He would make a phone call and then the fur would fly.

He leaped to his feet and attacked the steel door with his fists. After an interminable length of time the door slid back and Stoneface stood there—blue-clad, beefy and looking unintelligent.

“What is it?” Stoneface asked.

“The law says I’m entitled to one phone call,” he said, constricting his throat muscles so that the words would not come out as a croak.

He moved back a step to make it obvious that he had no intention of trying to bolt through the door. It would not help to antagonize this moron. He felt new confidence pouring through him.

Seconds later he felt it drain out of him in one big bubble for Stoneface was frowning at him and saying, “What is law?”

He knew his own expression was collapsing into stupid disbelief.

“Don’t start that again,” he said angrily. “It won’t work. I’m a decent, law-abiding citizen who’s been locked up without even being charged. You can’t get away with it. I demand that you let me call my lawyer.”

Stoneface stared.

“What is lawyer?” he asked curiously.

When Duncan only glared at him he walked out. As the door began to slide shut, Duncan’s rage exploded.

“How long are you going to keep me in here?”

“Until they come,” answered Stoneface before the edge of the door met the panel with a depressing clang.

I won’t, Duncan thought. He would be damned if he would scream. He wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of listening to his fear. He rubbed a sore place on his arm.

Until they come . . .

“They,” Duncan mumbled.

The word had sounded strangely emphatic as Stoneface had used it—as if he had uttered some Finality.

"THEY," Duncan said again, trying to give it the proper inflection, decipher its meaning. What could they mean? A firing squad? Were THEY going to shoot him because he had resisted arrest?

Stop it, he told himself sternly. Firing squads had gone out with capital punishment.

He sat down again, his back against the wall, so exhausted he could scarcely go through the mechanics of thinking.

HE THOUGHT he must have slept for when he opened his eyes the door was sliding back and two tall shadows were moving toward him.

"They" were here. He sat up straight and fought his urge to cringe against the wall. Savagely he forced his mind to focus on only one thought. If they tried to drag him out he would put up the fight of his life.

Neither man made a move to touch him. Both stood inside the doorway and simply looked at him for a long moment before one of them snapped his fingers smartly. This was evidently a signal to Stoneface because he went away and returned with two collapsible chairs.

They were tall and roughly dressed in high heavy boots, thick trousers and shirts. They sat down

rather hesitantly and continued to look at him while he made a suspicious examination of his own. They were middle-aged, past fifty anyway, but they looked to be in good shape.

"Are you going to pretend you're brainless like your guard?" he asked, gripping his knees to still their trembling. "Because if you are you're wasting your time. I can wait this thing out just as long as I have to."

"We're not going to pretend anything," one of them said and Duncan jerked his head quickly to look at him.

The man was ruddy-cheeked and perspiring as though he had just stepped from a steam bath. Which was impossible. The evening temperature must be about sixty, though it had been higher that afternoon when Stoneface had marched into Duncan's house and arrested him.

"Who are you?" he demanded, expecting no answer.

"My name is Rand. This is Mr. Deevers."

He eyed them in desperation. They looked as normal as any crooked cops but the sight of them did things to him. Not just because they were staring at him as if he had eight legs, but because they were free to go wherever they wished, while he knew that all he

had to do was make one quick move toward the open door before they blasted him.

Deevers was as sallow as Rand was ruddy, as if all the color had been drained from his skin. He looked worn out. They both did. Why weren't they wearing uniforms? Why were they dressed like this?

He folded his arms and glared at them. He would see himself in hell before he asked them why he had been arrested. It would be the same as begging.

The one called Deevers gave his head an impatient jerk and Rand spoke again.

"We have to ask you a few questions," he said. "Then maybe we can answer some of yours."

He smiled awkwardly, perhaps expecting to dent Duncan's armor of hostility.

The smile told Duncan one thing. If they had murder on their minds they did not intend to get to it immediately.

"Fire away," he said coldly.

"When did you first notice that your identity tag was gone?"

NOT that again. Not the identification card again. Duncan sagged against the wall, spent and beginning to feel ill. A lousy piece of paper that didn't mean a damn thing.

"I don't know," he mumbled.

"Think," Rand urged.

"It wasn't a tag. It was an ordinary identification card. I was looking for something in my wallet and the card dropped out. It fell into a gutter and washed down the drain."

Rand leaned forward.

"Where were you when this happened?"

"I'd just left work and was on my way home."

"What city?" Deevers snapped at him suddenly.

"Go to hell!" he snapped back.

Deevers grimaced and sat back in his chair. He looked at Rand.

"We're wasting time."

Duncan tasted the sweat on his upper lip. "If it's a case of identification I've more than enough evidence of who I am. There's my birth certificate."

They stared at him as if he had said something obscene. Rand seemed to be trying to mask his emotions but Deevers made no attempt to conceal his disgust.

"Where is it?" Rand said at last.

"Stoneface has it. Your man outside."

Rand looked at Deevers.

"Go get it."

Deevers scowled as he stood up.

"I still say we ought to finish it right now."

Rand kept his eyes focused on

the floor and didn't look up until the other came back. He took the slip of paper from Deever's hand and looked at it for a long minute.

"Where do you suppose he found this?" he said in quiet bafflement.

"There must be plenty of scraps around. This looks like part of a bill of—"

"I tell you, he wouldn't know where to look."

"Come on, Dave. You don't know what he was doing before he was brought in. He's been wandering all over the place."

By God, they could quit talking as if he weren't sitting right here listening to them. The birth certificate evidently meant no more to them than it had to Stoneface. Oh, that had been a cute scene.

Just a minute, Duncan had said, offended but absolutely sure of himself. I may have lost my identification card but that doesn't mean I don't exist any more. What kind of nonsense is this? I still have some rights.

And Stoneface had asked, *What are rights?*

Yes; those had been the words. And Duncan had yanked the birth certificate from his wallet and shoved it in the idiot's face, convinced that if that didn't satisfy the fool nothing would. God, but he had been right about that.

After reading the data out loud

Stoneface had asked, *What is father? What is mother? What is birth?*

Duncan saw Rand start to throw the birth certificate away, then give him a quick glance and stick it into his pocket. They mistook him for someone else, Duncan knew. Someone had done something and Deever and Rand thought he was the guilty party. And if he didn't get off his lard in a hurry the thing was going to get too far out of hand.

"I didn't do it," he said. "You've got the wrong man."

"What did your identification card look like?" asked Rand as though he hadn't heard a word.

They can't keep this up, said the babbler in Duncan's mind. Some time somebody had to start making sense. He knew he was doing himself no good shuddering and jerking the way he was doing, but some demon in his brain kept warning that if he didn't let loose in some manner he would end the day as insane as these two.

"It was white, three by two inches, approximately," he said. "It carried my name, address, physical description and draft status."

"And it was white?"

"I said it was white."

Deever was looking at him with open distaste.

Rand propped a boot on one knee and idly scraped debris from it.

“What did it look like after it fell out of your wallet?”

WHAT did it look like? With a sense of doom he had watched the white card being swept away in the muddy torrent. It had disappeared into the drain among leaves and mud. *What the hell?* he remembered himself asking out loud. He had been surprised when he had found himself kneeling by the gutter and even more surprised to discover that his body trembled. For a second he had thought the white card had changed color and shape just before it fell into the drain. It had looked strangely metallic and spherical, green and utterly unfamiliar there in the wash.

“It looked green,” he said and caught himself at once. “No, it was white. I told you—it was white.”

Rand’s fingers had frozen on his boot and now he glared at Deever’s with a savage little grin twisting his lips.

Deevers shrugged and shook his head.

“Doesn’t mean a thing.”

“The devil it doesn’t.”

Duncan had said out loud to himself, *What the hell?* and it

made him feel real again. All he had done was drop his identity card out of his wallet. It could happen to anyone and often did. What would he do about it? Get another, of course. Or make himself one. An identification card was a meaningless object, not even an actual symbol. A piece of paper could never represent the sum total of a man with a functioning brain and body.

“It doesn’t make any difference what color it was,” he said faintly, looking at Deevers.

“It’s very important,” said Rand.

“I can’t see that it matters. If you want to find out who I am it should be simple.”

“We already know who you are,” replied Deevers, grim amusement on his face.

Something fell within Duncan’s stomach, a hot weight that seemed to drop without end.

“Then why don’t you let me out of here?” he asked. “At least let me call my lawyer.”

Rand looked away.

“I’m afraid you can’t call him.”

“Why not?”

“Long distance rates, you know,” remarked Deevers with an open sneer.

Rand shot him an annoyed glance.

“Knock it off.”

"We're wasting time."

"You can't expect to solve this in a few hours."

"I don't expect to solve it at all," said Deevers. "It's a measly point zero zero two percent. I say we mark him and the others like him off as annual loss and forget it."

"No."

"We've gone through this routine a dozen times and we haven't learned a thing."

Duncan stared at them in bewilderment, the falling sensation in his stomach robbing him of strength. He placed his hands flat on the floor and braced himself. Slowly, laboriously, he began to stand up.

Deevers' face took on an expression of alarm. "Let's get out," he said swiftly.

"Wait—" cried Duncan in dismay, getting his feet under him.

By the time he was erect and halfway across the room both men were outside and the door was sliding shut. It halted a foot from the panel and Rand looked in at him.

"You mustn't ever do that again," he said.

"Do what?" Duncan stared back at him and then in fury and desperation shouted, "Let me out! You can't leave me here!"

He heard Deevers chuckle.

"I haven't done anything! If you

think I've committed a crime at least tell me what it is—"

Rand shook his head patiently. "You've committed no crime."

"All right." Duncan's voice was a whine—his legs were water. "I'm a worm and you're God Almighty but let me out of here."

"I can't."

"Tell me why!"

"Because you're insane."

HE RECOILED from the pain of the words, slamming up hard against the cell wall, hurting his back and his head. He stared about his prison, then turned to Rand. Dread choked his throat.

"I don't believe you," he said, reaching through the opening just as the man stepped back. "This isn't a sanitarium. Where are the doctors? The nurses? What is this place?"

Rand eyed him warily. "It's a storage room, the only place we have to put you in. Don't try to figure things out. You'll only hurt yourself."

Then his face was gone from the opening.

Duncan began to pace the floor, certain he had worn a rut in it by the time he gave up. He examined the walls of his cell. A smoother steel he had never placed his hands upon. It felt like glass and the rounded corners were as un-

marred as the rest, giving no hint of yielding to the pressure of his back muscles.

He was not insane. They were trying to drive him out of his mind or make him doubt his sanity. And he wasn't in any jail. Stoneface's uniform had fooled him but now he knew it wasn't genuine. The police station was phony. But this wasn't an asylum. It must be just what Rand had said it was, a storage room, but like no other Duncan had ever seen. A bulldozer would have had difficulty plowing its way through the thick door.

He stretched out on the cold steel and laid his head on his arms. By God, something reasonable was bound to emerge from all this sooner or later and when it did he was going to raise a hue and cry that would put Rand and Deever behind bars where they belonged.

He was drowsing when Rand came back. When he saw the man was not going to open the door Duncan didn't bother to get up. He propped his chin on his arms and watched as the other squinted through the narrow opening and finally located him.

"We have to talk some more."

"About the card, naturally," Duncan retorted sarcastically.

Rand smiled dryly.

"As a matter of fact, yes. It's very important, you know."

"No, I don't know. All I know is that you look like a sane sort of person, not at all like a kidnaper. Who are you working for? Some espionage outfit? Because you're wasting your time. I haven't any secrets."

Rand sighed as he leaned against the panel.

"Concentrate on the tag. I mean the card. How did you feel when you saw it lying in the gutter?"

"Nuts."

"Try to answer."

"I didn't feel anything. Why should I?"

"I think you're lying."

"Nuts."

"Believe me, it isn't."

"Believe you? That's good."

"Did you feel angry?" asked Rand patiently.

"No."

"Sad?"

"Of course not."

"Happy?"

"Ha-ha."

"Did you feel a sense of doom?"

Duncan clutched his head and writhed onto his back.

"Nan!" he yelled.

Rand gripped the edge of the door. "Who's Nan?"

"My wife, you fool!" howled Duncan.

"Your wife?"

His wife. His loving wife.

She had asked, *What happened?*

Were you in an accident? Did you fall?

He had just stepped into the house—tired, hungry and growing angry because there was no food on the table. She had kept nagging at him with her fool questions until he had lost his temper and had sworn at her. That had made him contrite and he had tried to kiss her. She had held him off while she stared at his chest with a horrified expression on her face. Then she had marched to the phone and—for crying out loud—had called the police.

“She’s ill,” he groaned to Rand. “I have to get out of here.” Rand was staring at him with a disbelieving look.

“When are you going to stop this?” Duncan demanded, trying to put some grit into his voice and failing.

“I can’t stop.”

All right. Enough was enough.

“At least bring me a cot to lie down on,” he said. “How would you enjoy sleeping on steel?”

“I’m sorry about that,” Rand said. “I should have thought.”

“Well?”

“I’ll send one in with N—with Stoneface.”

As Rand went away Duncan grinned savagely and stole to his feet. He had to do it. He had to get out one way or another.

HE WAS in the corner beside the door when Stoneface opened it and carried in a cot. The man had no warning at all. He was setting the bed down when Duncan’s bunched fists crashed down on his neck.

He saw the differences immediately when he stepped out of the cell. Someone had taken the police station away. He was now in an incredibly small enclosure, all of it made of steel, with a small door beside his prison and another one ten feet away.

Oh God. Before his dread could begin to build he cut it off sharply. It was all right, he thought steadily. Let them switch things around. It wasn’t going to stop him for a second.

He pressed on the door beside the cell and it slid back a fraction of an inch. Sucking in his breath, he stiffened to immobility as he overheard Rand and Deevers talking.

“Conscience is a function of intelligence,” Rand was saying with quiet heat. “Where the devil is yours, since you’re so bright?”

“I don’t believe in wasting it,” was Deevers’ blunt reply.

“We’re responsible. We did it to him, you and I.”

“So we did it. You’ve enough business sense for me not to have to tell you what to do.”

"Blast you, he'll go into the Atomizer soon enough!"

Duncan pressed on the door and it slid back. Inside the room he pressed the door shut and stepped behind a row of tall cartons. He still couldn't see them. He moved toward the sound of their voices.

"It happened because he lost his identity tag," said Rand doggedly, as if he were repeating a tiresome theme.

"That's screwy."

"It's the growth unit that's screwy."

Deevers' voice turned frigid. "Now what are you suggesting?"

A sound of disgust, then: "Don't worry, we can stop this without your losing money."

"So you're convinced you have it all figured out?"

"I am. My theory is that when he lost his identity tag he went into a state of shock. Suddenly he was no one. He couldn't stand it and he immediately fell back on his subconscious. Damn it, don't sneer. It's obvious he has one. Where else does he get his memories? Don't you see? He couldn't stand being a nonentity. He had to be somebody."

What Deevers saw had nothing to do with what Rand was saying. His eyes widened in shock and his already pale face turned a dull shade of gray as he spied Duncan

standing behind the cartons. He overturned his coffee cup as his hands flew apart in a motion of fright.

An abrupt stiffening in Rand's back was the only sign that Rand, too was aware.

"I'm younger and bigger than the both of you and I'm desperate," Duncan said. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Don't come any closer!" croaked Deevers. His hand shot into the air, fingers splayed, and stayed there as though it could hold Duncan back. "Where's the guard?"

"I knocked him out. Don't worry. I didn't hurt him."

"Oh—oh, my God," Deevers breathed and then his eyes darted to Rand. "You and your damned psychology!"

Rand turned slowly in his chair. The color was gone from his face but he appeared to be calm and unalarmed.

"He isn't dangerous," he said quietly.

Duncan stepped cautiously from behind the cartons, his body rigid with apprehension.

THEY had been drinking coffee. He filed the item as insignificant. The table was littered with cigarette stubs. Another item of non-danger. Two bunks hugged a

wall and an old oil-burner warmed a coffee pot. The cartons and boxes flanking the walls bore food labels. An open closet revealed several articles of clothing—coats, hoods, boots—and a pair of weird outfits like rubberized diving suits hung from a wall hook.

He saw no weapons at all, not until he turned and saw the gun Deevers was pointing at him.

Rand must have sensed his alarm because he spun toward Deevers and snapped, "Put that away!"

The gun wavered in Deevers' grasp. "What's he going to do?"

Duncan's hands squeezed into fists. "You've got no right to shoot me," he said. "I haven't done anything."

"He's right," said Rand. "Put it down."

Deevers trembled in indecision. Suddenly he tossed the gun to the floor and watched it skid to rest at Duncan's feet.

"Go on," he said huskily. "Pick it up. You're the boss here."

"I don't want the gun. I want out."

"There's no place to go," Rand said in a strange voice that grated on Duncan's spine.

"I want to go home."

"This isn't—"

"Let him go!" Deevers ground out through clenched teeth.

"Can't you get it through your thick head that he's suffering?"

"Go on," Deevers said to Duncan, a tight grin on his mouth. "You're free. Don't listen to him. He's crazier than you are."

His throat dry, Duncan started toward the door. He was almost there when Rand called to him with such urgency that he hesitated in spite of himself.

The man sat forward in his chair, his head drooping between his knees and his gaze focused blankly on his hands.

"When you go out make sure you close all the doors after you," he said. "And when you come back be sure to do the same."

"I'm not coming back."

"You will. The delusion began breaking up the moment you said that tag was green. Just remember what I'm saying. Our lives depend on it." He raised his head and gave Duncan an exhausted look. "Don't blame us too much. We didn't mean to do it."

There was no call for Rand to tremble, Duncan thought. It was just another trick to keep him here until they finished whatever it was they'd begun. To the devil with Rand and Deever—both! He was free, wasn't he?

Free, free—he had never known freedom to be so exalting, so mind-staggeringly exhilarating. He

raced toward the world outside as though he had been gone from it for an eternity, his feet making clicking sounds on the steel floor as he sped through doors and hurriedly closed them after him. He was in a tunnel of steel—a tunnel divided into three short compartments containing large crates and pieces of machinery to which he didn't give a second glance.

And then he was out. At last. Out, God, from that shell of a grave. Out into—oh, God—what was he out in? What inconceivable wrong turn had he made? Surely something he had done explained what stretched about him in every direction. He had gone the wrong way, had missed a turn somehow, had let himself get mixed up—for this—this wasn't—

It was all right when they came into his home and dragged him away without caring how he suffered—and it was all right when they threw him into a dark hole and left him like a sodden, animal hulk. It was even all right when they took away the police station and put a morass of steel caverns in its place. But, oh God, this wasn't all right! They couldn't take away the world from under his feet!

THE sky was an inferno of white flame dominated by a

sun that lashed the ground in a solid sheet of light. Thick clouds bunched everywhere, yet the vast expanse was a blinding mirror. The ground beneath him was a barren waste. No soil lay there, only a pitted plane of dust that rose to choke him as he stumbled about in fear. Jagged pinnacles of rock rose all around him, some as tall as buildings, other so small he could step over them. Heat waves made the space in front of him dance crazily.

He saw movement some distance away against the high, ugly horizon. He went that way, his heart slamming against his ribs in powerful thumps. As he walked he prayed that it was Earth he trod, some great and unexplored desert hidden for eternities from the sight and mind of man, some forgotten pit where the laws of nature followed their own strange patterns and had no part with normalcy. But he knew this was no abnormal piece of Earth. It was the wrecked surface of another world, some other planet, some strange and terrifying place he had never seen.

Now he could see figures moving in the distance and he quickened his pace, for they looked like men. Hope reared within him and battled his fear that he was alone on an alien planet with two madmen:

A great valley had been slashed out of the planet's body, a valley deep enough to accommodate a vast complexity of machinery. The long slope was terraced with deep shelves forming a gigantic stairway that descended into a pit. Great shovels scooped up tons of blasted rock and dumped them into a line of open cars that rolled on steel tracks out of a shallow lip of the valley. The tracks dipped across a clear area, where they disappeared into the jagged rocks.

Crews labored at the mouth of a deep shaft in the pit, guiding a pulley that drew buckets from within the planet and carried them swiftly toward and into an open, domed, steel structure rearing at the valley's edge.

Other crews worked above the valley with large sluices that filtered samples of rock into a funnel-shaped container. These were the laborers Duncan had spied from the distance and as he rushed toward them his lips formed words of greeting. He was no more than twenty feet away from the nearest one when he stopped running. The greeting froze on his lips and he stood staring in disbelief at the man who wasn't a man at all.

Not one of the figures was human. They were insects—giant, agile, antlike creatures that moved much faster than humans

and possessed strength enough to lift and manipulate buckets that must have contained a quarter-ton of ore.

They worked with silent precision and, as Duncan took a faltering step toward them, they turned to give him a glance and then went on with their work.

Their bodies were a shiny brown series of hairy bubbles, tier upon tier forming two legs, a torso, two arms with three flexible digits for hands and a large, knobby head. They had two bulging eyes that glistened like dark liquid. A small hole the size of a quarter was situated beneath the eyes.

He didn't see a single human being. The crews in the valley, the workers above it, the occasional laborers who moved in and out of the domed structure were ants, every one.

For long minutes he let this fact be absorbed by his brain. New fear stole into his mind like fog prowling through forbidden corners, a nameless dread that soaked into him like cold water.

HE STARTED toward the nearest creatures, who were watching a stream of dirty water gush down a sluice. His fear made him clumsy and he didn't see the mound of ore until he had fallen over it. He sprawled on his back,

staring up into the featureless face of one of the insects, who bent over him.

"You have fallen," it said in a deep monotone. "I will help you up and we will both check you carefully for damage."

The hands that took him and put him on his feet were hard and powerful. A small green circular plate was imbedded in the middle of the ant's thick, horny chest. Stamped upon it were the letters, ABT. The two bulging eyes looked down at his legs, then traveled slowly upward to rivet on his chest.

"Your identity tag is gone," intoned the ant.

Duncan tore himself free and began to back away.

"You're a bug," he whispered in fright. "You don't know anything." All at once he was shouting. "You don't know anything!"

"Are you really there?" asked the ant.

"A stupid, brainless collection of instincts," Duncan rasped, slipping and sliding on the treacherous ground. The ant took a step toward him and he cried, "Get away from me!"

"You have no identity," said the creature. "There is no such entity as a selfless being in a rational order. A man ought to be notified."

"I'm a man," whimpered Duncan.

"You are nothing. I do not comprehend why you appear to be standing there."

A second ant suddenly stepped between them. Its eyes surveyed ABT and then whipped about to focus on Duncan. The plate on its chest bore the letters, NN.

"This is a lost one," it said, pointing a digit at Duncan. "Let him alone. Do not look at him. Do not think of him. He is lost."

ABT nodded slowly. "I comprehend. Yes, you are right. He is lost."

Duncan stumbled away and hid behind a thin stalk of rock. The two ants stared after him for a few moments, then went back to the sluice.

He collapsed onto his back. He looked at the blinding sun. There was nothing in the sky but the white glare that seemed to be everywhere, reaching into his brain, illuminating his thoughts. Unbidden, the knowledge came. The sun looked like this because the atmosphere was different from that of Earth's.

His chest moved up and down, drawing in lungfuls of fresh air. No. This was part of the dream and not reality. He was the dream. Everything was reality but himself.

He wanted to believe it, desperately wanted to, and then he even gave up this lie. He was real and so was the incredible planet on which he lay, and these two facts added together meant that either he was capable of breathing where there was no oxygen to breathe or he was breathing substances poisonous to human beings.

But he was of Earth, an Earthman, with a white house and a wife named Nan who had brown hair and soft skin. The children would resemble her when they were born. Or had they already been born? The sun burned his brain so that he couldn't remember. He lowered his head to the sterile ground and closed his eyes.

IT TOOK him a long time to retrace his steps back into the tunnel. He stumbled as if blind, crashing headlong into great scarred dunes, falling into empty gullies and painfully hauling himself out.

He closed all the doors behind him.

Rand and Deevers had hauled Stoneface from the cell and laid him in a corner of their living quarters. Duncan stood looking at what he had believed was a human being. He had thought he was knocking out a man. What he had

done was destroy a giant ant. His fists had crushed the spindly neck and nearly severed the head. The tangle of bloody loops and spongy gray matter bulged from the skull. The green chest tag with the letters NN lay on the floor like an eye that mocked him.

Deevers had whirled as he came in and scuttled to the far side of the table. He sat down, his eyes hard and wary.

Rand was standing in the middle of the room, his hands behind his back. He stared intently at the floor, as though he were unable or unwilling to look at anything else.

With shuffling steps Duncan moved until he stood directly in front of Rand. He fought to keep his gaze steady but as the man raised his head he found his own drooping until his chin touched his chest. He felt sweat forming on his back and his mind cringed as he waited for the words that would condemn him to an insane nonentity.

He still wasn't prepared for them when they came. They were whips that lashed his body with steel tips, driving him into a dark tunnel where he cowered in terror. Without looking at Rand he sought for the lie in the man's tone, the subtle slyness that would prove this thing a hoax, a fraud, an

attempt to destroy his reality for some obscure purpose.

There was no mockery in Rand's voice, no evidence of fraud. He spoke evenly and without anger, frankly and cruelly, and only the queer little breathing gasps he took between sentences betrayed his awareness of the pain he was causing.

"Deevers and I hold controlling interests in a company on Earth called the DNA Laboratory. We make living organisms to labor on planets hostile to men. Our major production concerns a large insectlike creature whose job it is to mine metals unavailable on Earth on other worlds. The elements in all organisms are the same. Only the proportions vary. An organism grows if new matter accumulates faster than the old matter breaks down. Maturity is reached when matter-building takes place at the same rate as the old matter disintegrates. What we do is hold off this last process until our products arrive at a satisfactory size.

"Our 'insects' come in three classifications—three types conditioned and trained for three specific jobs. The DKN and ABT types operate the sluices and mine the pits. Our two NN types are programed to monitor the oth-

ers, to see that nothing goes wrong. Two years ago one of the ABT's went insane. When Deevers and I arrived we found that ABT thought he was a man. We spent two years trying to find out what made him and several subsequent insects psychotic. Now we know, thanks to you.

"Our creatures are grown from a small portion of life-material, the patterns of development carefully manipulated so that the nervous system and relevant muscular units will be compatible with the brain that is constructed separately. As the 'insect' grows it is chemically conditioned to survive in various types of environments. The carbohydrates, fats and proteins constituting the brain are designed in such a way that they reproduce a human brain, not just a reasonable facsimile but an exact duplication of the brain of a man who once lived. Who the man was whose brain we used as a model doesn't matter. What does matter is that we've created something we don't understand. Deevers and I wanted time to test our new products thoroughly before they were brought here, but the government needed our 'insects' and pressured us into giving up that part of our program. We consented because we had no reason to suspect our

'insects' knew anything other than what they had been taught. The peculiar thing is, we're pretty certain those creatures working out there *don't* know anything else.

"But you do and the others like you did. A few hours ago you lost your identity tag. Maybe it was snagged by one of the pulley hooks that draw buckets to the sluices. However it was lost, you found yourself without an identity. Your brain rejected the concept of nonentity and fashioned you a new self. We don't know how or why this happened. We don't know how you could acquire memories of Earth and human life and culture when nobody taught them to you, but we know that you have.

"I'd like to stop this whole business right now. I want a year to study my products, throw every psychological test in the book at them, find out just what it is I've made, whether I've made a creature satisfied to do its work as I intended or an alien monstrosity condemned to misery. But they won't give me that year. The government says no. The 'insects' will be used to produce what Earth needs regardless of my objections. So there's only one thing I can do—and I hope to God it's the right thing and not just a minor interference that will aggravate

the situation. From now on the workers will be made without any real identity. They won't be trained to self-awareness in the sense that there's any significance attached to it. Their letter types will be attached under the loop between their thorax and pelvis and they'll know nothing about it. I hope it works. I hope that if they have no identities—if they aren't taught that there is such a thing as real self—they won't be able to lose them.

"That's all I can do. I can't think of anything else at the moment."

RAND stopped speaking. He raised a hand and covered his eyes as if he were trying to block off some appalling view. His fingers dug savagely into his eyes and his shoulders slumped.

Duncan lifted one of his own hands and stared at it. He could see the creases in his palm, the dark hair above the knuckles on its back. He felt his heart pumping blood through his body. The dream—if the dimension of unreality into which his mind had plunged could be called a dream—wouldn't go away. His stomach lurched and he clamped his lips tightly.

He finally raised his head and looked at Rand.

"What happened to the others?"

"They wanted to die."

A voice whispered, "And so do I—" and Duncan realized it was his own.

"We have an Atomizer in the domed building by the valley," Rand said through white lips. "We use it to destroy the residue of rock collected from the last stages of our mining."

. Residue of rock. But to die as such would be to have lived not at all. And Duncan had lived. For the past hours he had lived. And so his death ought to have reason in it. But what reason was there for him?

He searched his memories and fastened upon one. Men once were put to death for crimes. And he was guilty of the crime of deception. He had pretended that he sprang from the loins of Man. This was a lie. His birth had been an assembly-line production, his conception accomplished within an insentient piece of laboratory equipment. He believed that Earth was his home, even as the earthworm's home is in her soil. This, too, was a lie. He had no home for the word connoted a place of growth, warmth and compassion, not an alien island called Venus where nothing grew but time, where warmth was measured

in the destructive holocaust of a blast furnace and where compassion was a cancerous spread in a jumble of DNA.

He was guilty. His sentence—death.

"I'm ready," he said.

Rand looked at him steadily. "I want to go with you."

Duncan hesitated.

"I know you're still in the dream," said Rand. "You can't go alone."

Duncan tried to speak, but all he could do was nod.

Rand took one of the weird suits from the wall hook and began to put it on.

Duncan watched.

Deevers sat at the table, relaxed now as he watched a trail of cigarette smoke climb toward the ceiling. As Duncan started toward him his head jerked around and his thin cheeks went hollow.

"You and I have something in common," Duncan said. "We're both lacking in humanness."

Deevers' mouth drew into a sullen line. His face darkened. He started to say something, then suddenly clamped his lips shut and turned his face away.

Rand led the way out to the second compartment, where he wheeled a small open car into the corridor. He and Duncan stepped into it, Rand behind the

wheel. The car moved down the corridor until the last steel door slid shut behind them.

Out in the open the car plowed effortlessly across gullies and between jutting rocks, carrying the two toward the valley and the domed building.

The sun was harsh and merciless. To Duncan it became a soft yellow orb that made him blink his eyes. The ground was rough and porous beneath them. He imagined that he saw grass swaying in the wind, watched a rabbit dart from its burrow and sniff at the air for a moment before it lunged into a thicket.

Rand took him into the building past the fiery furnaces that he didn't remember, along a twisting corridor that led into a blindingly hot room where yellow gold leaped down a narrow sluice and splattered into small molds that rolled away on steel tracks.

The Atomizer was taller than a man and twice as wide. It was a box of metal with a transparent door. When Duncan looked into it he saw the air within shimmer as desert air shimmers beneath the sun.

Rand had him by the arm.

"Can you hear me?" he asked, his face pale behind the visor, the hand on Duncan's arm trembling.

Duncan nodded.

"You only have to step inside and close the door."

He took a step toward the box.

Rand held him fast. "Let the dream go! What good has it done you? You can't go like this."

Duncan knew that if he were a man on Earth condemned to die it could happen the same way. Someone might come and say, *Let me give you something. It's perfectly all right, the law allows it. It will make your suffering easier to bear. You won't know where you are. You won't even know who you are.* . . .

No. . .

As he stepped through the door he was looking at a tiny splash of light that might have been made by the sun.

He closed the door with his own hand.

He saw Rand's lips forming the soundless words, "Goodbye, DKN."

The dream sheltered him, reared invincibly between him and the specter of an 'insect' self. In his mind he cried, *I am a man!* and his reality was victorious over the other reality. The destructive forces that streamed through the atoms of his tough, leathery body penetrated the sensitive softness of a human being, and his journey into oblivion was painful and terrible. As he desired. ●

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Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

BY NOW most readers of science fiction must have learned that John W. Campbell died on July 11, 1971. The loss to the field cannot be measured. During thirty-four years as an editor he discovered and developed most of today's top writers and his ideas of what science fiction should be were largely responsible for its evolution into an accepted category of book publishing.

Because of his importance as an editor, however, his contributions as a writer are too often overlooked. Most of his works are not currently available in book form—so this time let's dwell briefly on books that are not on the stands, though they should be.

Campbell must really be considered as two writers, both sufficiently major to merit lasting attention. Under his own name, his

stories appeared from 1930 through 1937. These featured heavy science—in them the limits of man's knowledge and achievements were stretched well beyond other writers' limitations. The wonder of science and the power of technology were more important in them than style, mood or characterization. They were never meant to be literary achievements—but as space opera they were breathtaking. To my taste, they were better than the work of E.E. Smith, whose books are still available.

Under the byline of Don A. Stuart, from 1934 until 1939, Campbell established himself as an entirely different writer. He was the first man to write consistently the type of fiction we now call modern and he did it so well that his stories still win a high place

in any list of the best of all time.

He was preëminent in two fields. Yet today I cannot find a single volume of his work in print, though some of the stories are available in several top anthologies.

The trouble seems to be that Campbell wrote before major book publishers had discovered science fiction and only "fan" publishers were giving out contracts. Most of his books were printed at least twenty years ago. Now, since they have been in book form, the hard-cover houses won't reprint them and the softcover people don't pick them up because they aren't in hard covers or because their original sales were—necessarily—small. If that would seem to indicate that most publishers remain ignorant of the field and its potentials, the implication is purely deliberate.

The Stuart stories were usually short, suitable only for collections, with the exception of a single short novel entitled *The Elder Gods*. This came out as half of a book from one of the "fan" houses. It is a fine sword-and-sorcery novel, having some of the magic of A. Merritt but a lot more logic in its development than much of Merritt's work. It should have been reprinted often, but I can find no evidence that it is to appear again. Of the two collections once issued, *Who Goes There?* was brought out in soft covers nearly twenty years

ago, but has not been reissued. I understand from Scott Meredith, Campbell's agent, that the second collection, *Cloak of Aesir*, will appear in soft covers shortly. If you find it on your stands—buy it at once. It may be your only chance to get a fair sampling of Campbell's writing.

Certainly there seem to be no plans to issue any of the work done under Campbell's own name. These were once fairly well represented in book form, but I can now find none in print. The almost legendary Arcot-Wade-and-Morey stories were brought out by Ace as *The Black Star Passes* and *Islands of Space*, which concludes with perhaps the wildest development of space opera ever imagined. Ace also published *The Mightiest Machine*, though not its sequel, *The Incredible Planet*. Other Campbell novels never appeared in book form. One of these was originally published in a magazine under a different title for each installment, but is remembered as either *The Mother World* or *Conquest of the Planets*. I consider it one of the best of the hard-science novels—it was based on Dirac's theories in which space and matter are treated as different states of the same thing, and capable of giving men powers beside which psi would be kindergarten stuff.

It seems highly peculiar that one of the best and most influential

writers of science fiction should have no books currently on the stands and only one promised for the future. It is especially strange when one considers the number of books that are available but should not be!

ONE of these latter, incidentally, is *The Sea Is Boiling Hot*, by George Bamber (Ace, 75¢). Superficially, from the dust jacket, this should be a timely story of the struggle against pollution at a time when man can exist only in enclosed cities. But the story begins with the "hero" Heron knowing that he has the answer to the problem; hence, there is no longer any plot after about page 24. Then we learn at once that Heron has no intention of revealing this secret: "I know but I won't tell." We now have a coy fool as our main character. "Science" is introduced when the author, who apparently never heard of oxidation and reduction, suggests that the opposite of "combustion" must be given a new term, "imbustion." (Doesn't know much about language, either, it seems.) We fiddle around with assorted sex scenes at a totally unemotional level and then get into a chase scene, to wind up with Heron giving up the big secret at the end, for no better reason than he had at the beginning. At this point boredom grows climactic. I really can't believe that publishers

are that hard up for material!

There is one book, however, that is both available and excellent in every way. This is the softcover edition of what may be the best anthology of science fiction ever put together. At a price of \$1.50, *Science Fiction Hall of Fame*, edited by Robert Silverberg (Avon), is a book that should be bought at once by anyone who doesn't have the hardcover version. I considered it a bargain at more than five times the price, so it's the best buy in science fiction now.

I hope that this volume will remain in print for at least another decade, since it makes the best one-volume introduction to science fiction I have found. But in case it suffers the usual fate of giving place to something new and not as good after a short time, I'd advise getting more than one copy. At this price you can afford it—and owning a spare is better than being afraid to lend your sole copy.

As usual, of course, most books lie somewhere between the above two extremes. One to which I have been looking forward is the sequel to *The Warlock in Spite of Himself*, from which I derived more pure fun than from almost any other novel last year. *King Kobold*, by Christopher Stash-eff (Ace, 75¢), is not up to the high level of the former book, I'm sorry to say, but I would have en-

joyed it moderately well if I hadn't expected too much. Mostly it seems lacking the spontaneity of its predecessor.

This time, Rod Gallowglass, the High Warlock, is somehow more a figurehead than he was in the earlier work. He is less personally involved—he now holds an official position where his job demands he handle things, and the pressures on him are much weaker. Too, the reader is shown too many events that are outside the protagonist's ken. This puts one in the position of frequently knowing more about the story than he does and further saps interest.

The inventions in the current volume seem inferior to those in the previous novel. Nothing in this book equals the wonderfully zany ghosts and their king. No character stands out as did the loyal-disloyal aide and enemy we met before. Even the robot horse does nothing but sink into the background—and Gramarye becomes the setting for just another future sword and sorcery struggle.

The menace this time around is not internal to Gramarye or to Rod's lack of knowledge. We have a Menace—a typically ugly, brutish menace, apparently. Creatures like Neanderthal men (as pictured in too many stories) are being led against the king and Rod is summoned to handle

them. Okay, turns out that the reasons for the invasion aren't quite what we might expect; but they are not that much of a surprise, either.

There are some excellent touches, such as the relationship of an old witch and a hermit wizard and their corporeal but unborn son. But somehow, the whole matter of the son becomes contrived and lackluster when he has to be fitted into the interplanetary organization to which Rod belongs.

Stasheff writes well and some of his science fiction and fantasy combine smoothly. But this book seems overplotted and underdone—too routine for the writer's obvious talents. I'd give it a lukewarm recommendation—but it's worth reading if you don't expect too much of the evening spent with it. And I still think Stasheff is going to make a reputation as a fine writer.

ANOTHER mild disappointment is *The Flying Sorcerers*, by David Gerrold and Larry Niven (Ballantine, 95¢). Niven has become a major writer and I expect Gerrold to establish himself as top rank shortly. But in this book, it seems to me, they've taken too many bites from a single pie.

The book falls into two sections. The first, which fits the title, deals with a local sorcerer who finds his territory invaded by a human scientist—a fellow sorcerer

dealing in other magic, from his view. Shoogar does what any honest sorcerer must do—he resorts to every dishonest trick in his book. And the war between Shoogar and “Purple,” the human, is a lovely war indeed. This takes up the first half of the book, and it is delightful.

But then we find that the war isn't over, exactly. Purple turns up again and this time he has been stranded—his ferry ship down to the planet is destroyed and his new location is one from which he cannot make radio contact with the main ship. His object is to get the primitive natives, half under Shoogar's control, to build him a balloon and let him fly to where the ship can be ordered down.

There's a good deal of ingenious work in this half, also. But it is no longer a light and comic book. Shoogar is shoved into the background, where he can only wander around muttering darkly and planning pretty revenge. From a clever and resourceful man who took on a power bigger than himself—and won—he becomes only a stupid nuisance who cannot understand what goes on.

The basic story of a stranded Earthman who has to turn a primitive tribe into a post-industrial-revolution people to get them to build what he needs is a good situation; and the effects on the primitives are well conceived, as

is the technology developed.

But the two halves just don't make a whole. The second half is made less interesting by the presence of Shoogar and the first half is made somewhat less pointed when we realize how little the sorcerer deserved all the cheering we were doing for him. It is quite impossible now to believe that this pitiful, ignorant warlock could have accomplished what we had to accept before from him.

It's not at all a bad book—but it isn't all a good one. The first half, to the triumph of Shoogar, is well worth reading. But the book should then be put aside for a few months before trying the second half.

There's also a minor complaint I have with the book. Niven and Gerrold have loaded it with names slightly distorted from those of science-fiction writers and fans. Sure, it's a slightly interesting guessing game decoding them. But it soon ceases to be funny and it distracts from following the story and makes everything too much of a put-on. This is basically an amateur trick; it should be reserved for fanzines, not used in professional work.

A somewhat similar fault mars *Jack of Shadows*, by Roger Zelazny (Walker, \$5.95). Through half of the book, Jack is a sort of Til Eulenspiegel—a puckish waif among the “gods” of a curious

world, where his dominion and power lie in the shadows of the land between light-side and dark-side.

This world might be one of those constructed by men such as the protagonist of *Isle of the Dead*. It has to be a construct, since it is carefully arranged to have no rotation of day and night; yet the bright side is shielded against too much heat and the dark is provided with heat. It has its own "gods," or rulers, with extraordinary powers; and one of their functions is to maintain the various balances on the world, however much they feud otherwise.

The first half of the book carries Jack to the cold area where magic rules—and since his powers involve magic, this is all right. But then he moves to the lighted area—an area singularly similar to today's Earth and hence rather uninteresting. There he acquires a knowledge of science, goes back to defeat his enemies with his new powers and becomes master, only to find he has to perform his balancing act alone—if he can—by rather routine travels into a computer complex, lacking the magic to which we've become accustomed.

The first part is minor Zelazny, quite enjoyable. The second half breaks away, becomes rather grim and ugly—and loses all the glamor it needs to be anything but dull.

In the end, because we don't learn enough about Jack and his origins, the whole thing seems rather pointless. Wait for the softcover version; it's certainly not worth Walker's price.

FINALLY we come to John Norman. His *Raiders of Gor* (Ballantine, 95¢) is the sixth in the series. I find myself unable to resist the Gor novels, despite the irritation I usually feel when reading them. (Except for the third, where I found the Priest-Kings excellently handled.) Norman seems capable of making every mistake a writer can make.

Yet he is also the only writer today who seems able to capture any of the feeling I used to find in the Martian stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs. And while my taste may still be adolescent in this, I seem to find a great many who agree and who also turn to the Gor novels—they may be *gaffé*, but they're the only game of that sort in town. And on all-over balance, they've captured more of the romance and appeal of the old Barsoom novels than anyone else has been able to develop.

This time Norman has made almost none of the mistakes of his last two books. He has largely gotten off his adolescent sex kick where he was out establishing Men's Lib by proving that every

woman wants to be a slave and that nothing captures the female heart like a good beating. And he hasn't tricked up his method of telling the story as he did in the last—he tells it straight this time and there are no lapses that have to be covered by flashbacks where the real action should be shown. Obviously he can learn by experience.

But he has fallen into another error—less annoying, yet somehow less fascinating. He seems to have lost purpose as a result of trying a rather commendable experiment. Most of his books lately have been centered on the mystery of alien invaders and Cabot's search to help the Priest-Kings defeat them. This book starts that way, but then gets sidetracked.

Apparently, Norman decided that he was tired of a hero who was all strong and brave and resolute. He makes Cabot demonstrate a moment of surrender and cowardice, followed by self-loathing—not a bad idea, in a way, even though it seems revolutionary in this type of story.

Unfortunately, perhaps because there is no precedent, Cabot seems not to know how to go about demonstrating a weakness. Instead of seeing himself as having been forced into a hopeless situation by a concatenation of irresistible circumstances, Cabot just suddenly turns coward for

a moment. The scene isn't convincing—its development is too quick and too much like other cases where he was not afraid. Then the book goes glimmering off into vaporous self-loathing in which Cabot seems to feel that since he is now scum of Gor, he might as well act as scummily as the pirates he joins.

Trouble is, he really doesn't act thus. He does a few things—as if periodically Norman remembered and threw the events that way—out of heroic character, but generally he is the same old Cabot. And in the end—the author's intent may be excellent—Cabot's discovery that any man can have moments of weakness without being less a hero is also too sudden, too easy and not at all convincing.

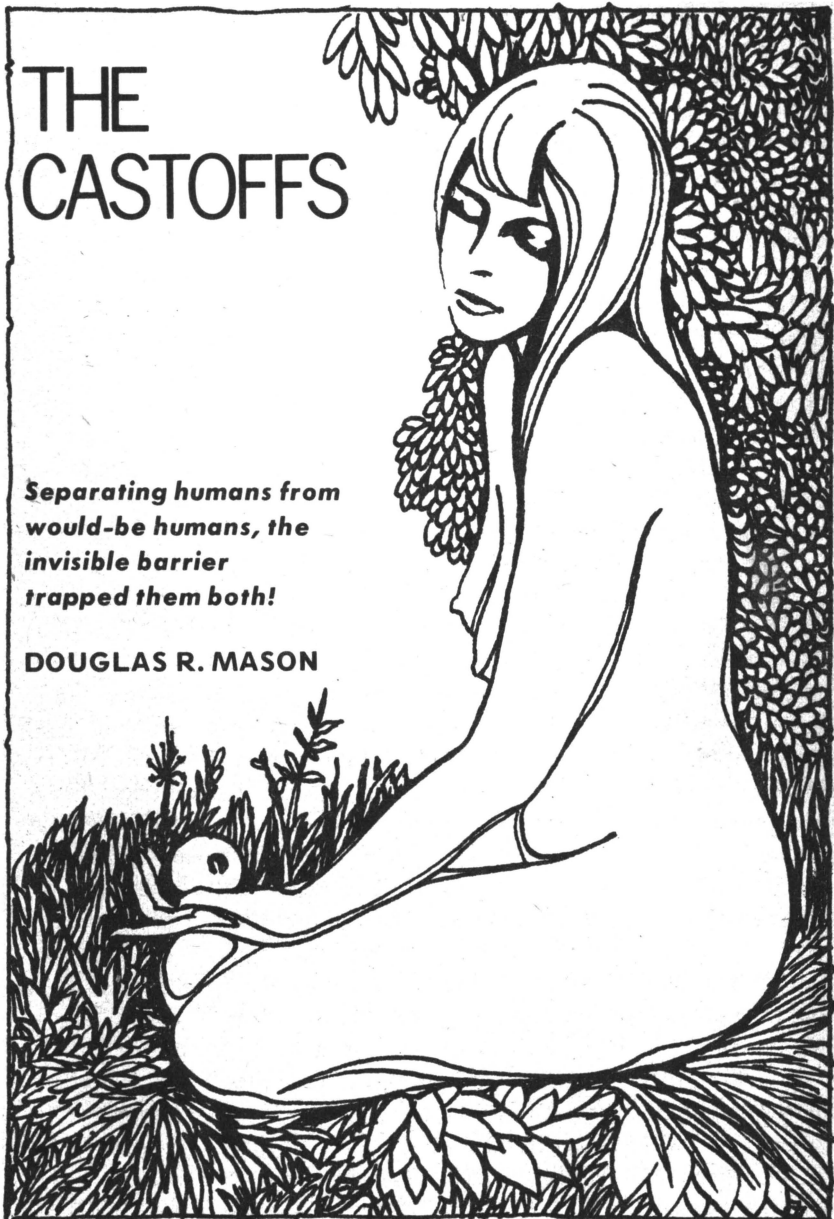
There is a story of romance and adventure mixed up in all this. But somehow, once he sees himself as scum, Cabot seems to lose all motivation, forget his mission for the Priest-Kings and mostly drift. The impression I get of the story is that it also drifts. It has none of the earlier faults, but it also has none of the earlier drive.

Still, I recommend it to all Gor fans. It has a lot of Norman's color, and by getting over his bad habits, Norman has put himself in a good form to continue the series. Anyhow, at 320 pages, there is a lot of action and adventure for the money! ●

THE CASTOFFS

*Separating humans from
would-be humans, the
invisible barrier
trapped them both!*

DOUGLAS R. MASON



AS FAR as she could see the forest was still. Quiet. Drugged by midday heat that set the horizon to shimmering. It was a stronger sun than the sun of Bromius and its warmth ran along her shoulders and arms like a tangible sheath.

She would miss it. It would not be long now before *Tregasid Three* completed its mission to the other planets of the system and appeared overhead like a ruby star to call her back. The cycle was complete. She and Atan had recorded the slow drift of a year's seasons, each more pleasant and agreeable than the last. All the data that anybody could ever require about the blue-green watery planet was methodically stored and indexed in the memory banks of the computer.

Ava's thoughts stopped short. "Pleasant," "agreeable"—those were danger words. She was using aesthetic judgment again. She was being unscientific. It was just as well that she had not spoken them out loud when Atan was around. In his present mood he would have had them in the log as sure as a gun.

Where was he anyway? Not much more than a hectare on the low plateau had been sealed off by the force field, but he had a knack of losing himself in it. Almost as

though he were deliberately hiding from her.

To some extent that was fine. He had turned out to be a poor companion for the long haul. He worked a sixteen-hour day and slept through the balance. As a professional she could admire the quality of the work he was doing. No other survey team would turn in a fuller or better documented brief. But he was programmed like an android whose courtesy tape had been omitted.

At the foot of the escarpment a slow clear river ran silently into the lush forest. On the far bank was a sandy clearing, a gold ochre strip, below viridian foliage dotted with asterisks of cobalt blue and lemon yellow.

As she watched, a small family party of hominids stepped from the leaf screen and walked cautiously to the water's edge. Either she was getting less critical or these were near enough in type to herself to be called human. She was all set to wave, then stopped.

Any movement on her part would only frighten them off. All mobile life forms had taken to leaving a wide gap between themselves and the invisible barrier that protected the strangers.

Ava watched the male wade thigh deep in the water, splash glittering handfuls over his head

and chest and then submerge until only his head was showing. The female was watching the forest, child straddled over one hip. She was less heavily furred than her partner. Straight black hair dropped below shoulder level in a smooth cowl, breasts were taut and neat. Tiring of watching the swimmer, she set the child down and walked away toward the tree line with a leg action that was feminine for any hominid culture in the galaxy.

When she returned she held a broad leaf across both hands, on it a small pyramid of large golden berries.

The bather waded ashore, scattering diamond droplets, the drag of the current emphasized in the powerful swing of his massive shoulders. At the river's edge he gathered a double handful of water and threw it in a shower at the other two.

The distance was too great for speech sounds to reach Ava, but the mime told her that it went like a bomb. The child rolled over and over in exaggerated, joyous terror and the female put down her fruit and ran for the male.

A wild cheerful tussle in the shallows followed.

AVA lay back on her flat rock and watched the sky. From ho-

rizon to horizon it was a clear cerulean blue. Beyond it was the black night of space and infinitely far was the cinnamon-tinged sky of Bromius. She felt suddenly more alone than at any time during the mission.

To Atan the family group at the river would consist of savages. Barely human. Items to list in his log with a total portrait, voice prints, biology, life style—all the data that described a specimen and left out the vital parameters that made a living man. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

When she looked again they were sitting eating the fruit and the man's—yes, he was a man—hand was resting comfortably on the woman's thigh.

Ava took off her electrum filigree headband and let her hair fall in a dark mane. Then she stood up and walked slowly down the slope to the river.

The force field was set some meters out from the edge of the water so that Atan could take specimens of fish for his collection. A small inflated power boat he used was drawn up on the shingle.

The child saw her first, stopped eating and pointed. The woman leaped to her feet, picked him up and ran for the trees, the man following more slowly, facing the danger, teeth bared.

At the river Ava stopped. Her reflection, familiar and unfamiliar, stared back. They had seen that creature. Tall, pale-skinned, shining metal cloth tabard with the double helix of Bromius worked in brilliants, long boots shining with every finish that could be devised to repel all known pests that might be harmful.

No wonder they had run for the bush. She was outside experience, a mechanical monster with a human head.

Before she realized what she intended to do, Ava had zipped down the seals of her tabard and lifted it over her head, leaving it to stand like a decapitated trunk. Then she pulled off her boots, stood for a count of five in her maize leotard, shrugged, wriggled lithely out of it and walked into the water.

If she had brought her activator, she would have switched out the field and swum across. As it was, she floated in the warm water, jackknifed to the sandy bottom to look at the plant life and came up streaming like a half-tide rock to hear her name being called.

"Ava."

"Down here."

Crotch deep in water she watched Atan stride down the slope, looking across the riv-

er—there still was movement in the trees. Then he saw her and stopped dead.

His voice came, hard-edged, "What do you think you are doing?"

The question made her analyze her motives. Maybe the answer she chose was true.

"I thought they should see we are flesh and blood under all the gear. We must look like mechanical marvels. It's no wonder they won't come near."

"So you thought a strip show would bridge the culture gap. Do you realize that without the barrier you might have been carried off and forcibly mated. Do you want to end up as one of the cows in a bull ape's family group?"

What had seemed a natural thing to do now looked ridiculous in her own eyes. Also she was conscious that a *cuirasse esthetique* was not cover enough in a dialogue with a fully clothed male standing on higher ground.

She decided she hated his guts, crossed her arms over her breasts and said, matching his tone, "There's no need to go on. I'm not stupid. Go away and I'll dress. What do you want me for anyway? You seem to be able to manage everything single-handed."

"Some calculation you should check. You are, after all, the math-

ematician of the station. I should be glad to have a few minutes of your attention. Let me remind you that our time is running out. The spacer could arrive any day."

Ava debated whether to scoop up a double handful of water and throw it at him. Or a rock. But he was too far away. Missing would ruin it as a gesture. She dropped her arms and began to wade elegantly for the home shore.

Atan turned on his heel and strode up the hill.

THE main meal of the day was taken at 1800 hours local reckoning. At first they had taken time over it, talking about the work of the day, reminiscing about Bromius, although there was a partial block on that. Deep briefing had not only given basic sex responses a shrewd knock; it had aimed to build in an inhibition of any nostalgic longing for their distant home planet. Theoretically they were proof against the fifth column that worked from the inside of every head to make bricks of unhappiness with or without straw.

In the early days of the Mission Ava had reckoned she had been lucky in the raffle. Besides being a fantastically good organizer, Atan had been a pleasant and witty companion. They had gotten along fine until he started the

recluse bit. At the same time he had taken to pulling rank and using this edgy hectoring tone as though he resented her being here at all.

Currently he was eating a nut cutlet simulate and checking over a sheaf of notes that represented the day's take. He had not even said he liked the omelet and she had spent at least ten minutes of her life's finite span working out the combination on the dispenser.

Stung at last to the direct question, she said, "Well, what did you make of it?"

Atan said, "Comprehensive as far as it goes, but I've only scratched the surface. Do you realize there could be at least three hundred and fifty thousand species of plants. Very much more complex than anything we have on Bromius. I've used four main groups for classification. Algae, mosses, ferns, seed-bearers. That seems to work out for this locale and I'd guess it would serve for the whole planet since the deviations in soil and climate are not very great. That reminds me—I have some specimens to fix before they go off. I'd like your help at first light. I want to do a final survey downriver. Pollen count over a measured square kilometer. Set up a sampling grid."

"Please set up a sampling grid."

"I haven't time. You do it."

The handiest missile was the water jug and she had it poised to throw, but he was already halfway across the clearing to the geodesic dome that served as a lab.

She cleared disposable tableware into the destructor and watched it dissolve. It looked like the only entertainment she was going to get. Atan was set for several hours, then he would go to bed.

Ava went to her own roomy cell, put on an actualizer tape, switched it off and looked out through the window. The planet's sun was standing on the horizon like a vermilion disk. It was the time of day when there was a sense that anything could happen.

She remembered the primitives and the sun reminded her of the golden fruit they had left on the sand. That would be something now for Atan's collection. Edible, too. God, it would serve him right if she put them on the menu for his next meal in spite of the absolute prohibition against eating any local product.

Taking a sudden decision she strapped on her equipment belt and returned to the clearing. A glow came from the dome. He was stuck at the coal face. No problem.

When she reached the river bank the sun was below the level and streamers of cadmium yellow and vermilion made a backdrop for the

forest. She pushed out the lightweight dinghy, neutralized the power screen and headed for the far shore.

Outside the barrier there was more noise—a confused racket like a crackle of static, as though the leaf curtain covered a frenzy of living action. Light levels were dropping fast and it took her longer to cross than she had expected—the current was doing its best to sweep the flimsy craft downstream.

When she hit the beach she had to use a hand lamp to search the ground.

Noise cut off as she walked up the sand and she felt the menace of sudden silence.

Atan could be right. She was behaving like a fool. Any minute there could be a rush from the forest and she would be cut off. Atan would not even know where to look for her. If he wanted to, the self-sufficient swine.

Then she saw what she was looking for, kneeled down and packed seven large hard berries into a pouch, using her left hand and keeping a roving beam round the tree line.

When it was done she fairly ran for the boat, pushed off and spun the rheostat into full-drive position, leaving a creamy wake across the dark river.

Atan took the half beaker of reddish juice without comment. Before breakfast he had fueled the excursion module and was obviously anxious to move off.

She had intended to serve pieces of fruit; but when she had cut across the tough golden rind she had found a reddish pulp and a mass of small hard seeds. It had been a job for the extractor to make a drink of it, acid, sweet, drying to the palate but a new and pleasant taste.

As he lifted the glass she almost warned him, but a persuasive voice in her ear put in its oar.

He deserves all he gets. Take him down a peg. Tell him later. After all, it isn't poison. You've tried it. Just wait until he's filling out the declaration that there's been no breach of biocontamination regs. See how he gets around that one. . .

Ten minutes later they were over tree-top height, clearing the invisible palisade and following the broad river.

ATAN swore as he watched blood well from a five-centimeter gash in the palm of his left hand. He dropped the net with its still struggling captive.

"You should have waited," Ava said. "Another minute and the nerve shot would have worked for

sure. Hold it up. I'll get a suture."

She ran the twenty meters to the module which was standing on its tripod jacks and scanning the area like a patient hound dog. When she was two paces away it began to bleep a warning, picking up the urgency in her head.

She said, "Shut up you fool, it's me—" and snatched a medicare pack.

Atan was standing like the statue of a demagogue and obediently sat across a handy tree trunk for attention. Absorbed by the professional angle Ava joined him knee to knee and took his hand on her lap. Neat economical movements sterilized the wound and ran in a flexible sealing tissue. Basic inoculations would take care of any alien microbe that might have gotten into the blood. Though for that matter she ought to take a sample smear from the creature's mouth and run it through the analyzer. It could just be one that nobody had thought about.

Concentrating on the chore, she was not watching Atan's right hand. When it homed on the nape of her neck and pushed its fingers gently up through her hair, she was a surprised medic.

She went still as any stone. Atan shuffled along his log cleverly getting his knees on the inside

track. The medicare pack sealed itself and rolled clear.

A prudent housekeeper, she tried to catch it, but she was held fast. The damaged hand, proving that she had done a good repair job, joined its partner to clamp her head in a firm grip.

Considering that she had been angling for a little personal attention for some time, her reaction was unreasonable.

"Atan. No. The codex."

To show that he knew all about it, he quoted section three from the top harshly, as though it had been set up to do him a personal injury.

"Also, in addition to the prohibitions above relating to all physical contact with aliens, there is the absolute prohibition against unnecessary physical contact between partners on a mission. Variations in radiation level cannot be precisely determined; pairing bonds established outside the home gravisphere could result in mutant genes being imported to Bromusian stock.' Do I need to go on?"

Head still fixed for a close view of his sternum, she was ideally placed to evaluate the old crack that love does not lie in gazing into a partner's eyes but in looking together in the same direction.

She remembered it. He had it right. It could be his favorite bedtime reading. They were consider-

ing the same text but he sounded angry about it.

Finger pressure swiveled her head on its stalk. His face was unexpectedly close. Eyes were serious, but gave the lie to the voice print. She was being looked at as though she were his apple from way back.

Fighting a rearguard, Ava said, "No—" again.

Atan said, "I like the shape of your mouth when you say that. It's convenient."

A gram of practice being worth a kilo of theory, he proved his point, homing on her lips with the precise component orientation that long-standing practice as a technical expert made second nature.

Ava's hands were flat on his chest pushing for out. Then the steam leaked. Her hands traveled up his tabard and locked behind his head. If she could have gotten in a final crack it might have been—if you can't beat it, join it.

After two minutes she knew she didn't want to beat it anyway and she was thinking unselfishly of Atan. As the headman of the group, he would have to pick up the tab when *Tregasid Three* made her planetfall. There would be the routine session on the recall couch to check that what was in the manifest was all there was of action for the trip.

It would be out and about on the screen in full color with the psycho team having a ball. So far there was no real damage. The solid achievement of the mission would outweigh it. He might get away with a blue star entry on his profile and a nominal fine.

Using a last kick of failing will power, she twisted free.

"Atan, listen to me."

"And why not? I haven't told you, but your voice is the rarest music. I particularly like the way you say Atan with that precise palatal tap on the T. Say it again."

"Atan!"

"That's it. Sends anticipatory shivers down my spine."

"Atan, I'm sorry."

"What do you have to be sorry about? Is it that nude bathing bit? You're thinking you triggered off all the chemically depressed lecher in me. Why do you think I've been avoiding you these last months? Do you know why? I couldn't trust myself to be near you. If anybody has to be sorry, it's me. But don't worry. There won't be any problem. The record will show that you were an unwilling victim. All I want from you is a promise that when we get back you'll consider a pairing application. God, how can you reduce what I feel to legal jargon."

"Atan, I'm ashamed. You're

making me feel ashamed. Please listen to me."

"Okay. The forest's ferny floor is yours."

"Let me go."

"Is that necessary?"

"You might think so when I tell you what I did."

STANDING beside the log, a meter away, Ava marshaled the facts, distracted by her audience's unaffected pleasure in simply looking at her. She reckoned that getting what you wanted had its problems and that it would be a fine thing if people could hit the mean between extremes of behaviour. Also she recognized that she didn't want to trigger off a reversion to the iron man routine.

She moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue and said, "Atan."

The excursion pod, as if on cue, went into spasm with its high-pitched bleep and Atan swung off his log and was beside her, one hand clamped around her waist, the other sawing around with a blaster, hunting a target.

Nothing extraordinary was visible, but the urgent signal went on. Something could be lurking on the far side of the pod, hidden by its petal antennae.

He said, "Wait," and took two steps. A net of fine sticky creeper dropped silently from the foliage

overhead and turned him into a cocoon.

Ava had a count of five to reflect that the book had a point. Personal involvement came at the expense of prudence. If Atan had not been distracted they would have been back on board with their specimen and with mega power under their thumb.

Her own cowl dropped neatly over her head and the set filled with extras as hominid types whipped out of the wookwork on all sides.

There are two sides to every situation. All the newcomers looked pleased. Enormous jaws were hinged open in grins that bared large yellow teeth. Flat noses were wrinkled with delight.

One massive male, feet astride, toes turned in, long arms hanging almost to his knees was jiggling up and down as though on hydraulic jacks.

For all their technical know-how, Atan and she had fallen for a stone-age ploy. Maybe because they had been sidetracked by a basic drive that had a stone-age simplicity. It was humiliating to believe that the book could be right all along. There was a moral in that somewhere, but there was no time to track it to its hole. The group had stopped its celebration dance and had closed in.

They were not the same species

as the family group she had watched across the river. These were hairier and more heavily built. One step farther back in the evolutionary chain or even coming up on a different track altogether.

Two males with hand axes—clumsy stones with one face flaked into a cutting edge—began working on her net. The links parted. One of them took her in a comprehensive grip so that she could not move her hands. His pungent body scent assaulted her nostrils.

Instinct had told their captors that the alien's equipment was dangerous and they systematically peeled away her gear as though husking a nut.

The leotard gave a little trouble, but even before it was sliced away it was clear that they had gotten themselves a surprise package. She had larger charms than Atan and everybody wanted to touch.

Passing around the inquisitive circle, a bewildered lay figure, she was only three meters from Atan when the excursion pod made a solo and strictly unrepeatable entry into the score.

Curiosity, evolution's handmaid, had moved a buck male to squeeze himself in the pilot's seat and rummage around with the switchgear. To further his research he had ripped away the hood of the instru-

ment cluster and raveled out a bundle of color-coded leads.

Twisting them in a cat's cradle and sawing them against a sharp edge to cut them free, he beat the maker's safety factor and brought the built-in destructor mechanism into circuit.

Bleeps accelerated to *prestissimo*.

There was a brilliant flash that froze the action into a still and a deep resonance that shook the floor. The excursion pod made its last trip in fist-sized gobbets that flew around the grove like shrapnel, with the head of the tribe's first scientist, sliced at the neck by a flailing strut, opting for vertical take-off, still set in a happy grin of achievement.

ATAN was seconds ahead of the game. The rising tempo of the bleeps from the pod had alerted him to the chance on the way. As the flash lit the grove and the hands gripping him opened in reaction, he was already hurling himself sideways toward Ava. He knocked her off her uneasy balance and was arched over her, shielding her with his body as the trash surged around the company. Before the shock wave had passed he was hauling her to her feet and making for the trees.

The going was rough on two sophisticates used to having a better power/weight ratio than anything in the neighborhood. But Atan kept going for a kilometer before he hauled her to a stop in a flowering shrub.

Chest heaving prettily, Ava opened her mouth to speak and got a hand clamped over it. Eyes rolling with emotion she stuck it out for half a minute and finally took a bite.

Atan said, "What do you want to do that for?"

"I have to breathe."

"Oh. Oh, well. It doesn't matter—they seem to have packed it in."

It was true. Forest noises, after a digestive lull were notching up to full strength, but there was no sound of beaters breaking through the undergrowth.

Atan said, "That was close. We shouldn't hang around. You okay?"

"That's relative. Compared to when?"

"Discounting wear and tear, you look fine. Exercise brings color to that alabaster skin."

Ava reckoned that the human situation was fraught with caprice. From being a human clam, Atan had switched to being an unseasonable talker. Also she was being gotten at by a pushy twig.

"There could be others. Shouldn't we get on?"

"Ruthless female logic at its best. Allow me."

Before she could say anything he had picked her up and lifted her clear to open ground.

Contact reminded her that she still had a confession to make.

"Atan I was telling you. It's all my fault."

"Save it. Tell me tonight and I'll fix a suitable background of erotic music. Now I'm not too clear about the direction. I reckon we should find the river and follow the bank. That way we can't miss."

He was right. But it took longer than either of them had believed possible. When they stumbled hand in hand around the last bend, wading in half a meter of water on the uneven river bed as a poor alternative to thigh deep undergrowth, the sun had set and the small boat was a dark blur on their private beach.

Atan stopped dead and Ava, programed to keep moving, went ahead until she was brought up short at the end of his arm.

"What is it now?"

"The screen. We're on the wrong side of the screen."

Truth has its place. But Ava, a tired wet nude wanting a bed, found it the last straw. Her knees buckled and she dropped neatly

into the river, disappearing as though by sleight of hand.

JAVEH, Commander of *Tregasid Three* looked at the main scanner without any enthusiasm. Vectors were right for a quick move out of the gravisphere and would not be right again for a period of weeks. With three more pickups to make he could not afford the time.

Latest reports from the home base made this mission a pointless exercise. Research teams from other ships had already reported in with better results nearer home. Any information from the blue-and-white watery sphere below was strictly for the archives. Tough on the two researchers who had spent a year down there. Tough on them all, for that matter—nobody handed out medals for a survey staff that found nothing.

Atan's hectare of cultivated ground was centered on the screen and looked deserted. The communications exec made no friends by putting it into words.

"I've been calling for the last hour, Commander. The signal is being received. How long do I go on?"

"Give me the link."

Javeh watched the screen.

"Javeh calling Atan. Prepare to beam out. Acknowledge."

Nothing intelligent moved below. A slight breeze rolled an empty can from where it had lodged at the foot of the dome and trundled it across the clearing. In its way it made the point. The ship was wasting time. The camp was deserted.

Any one of a hundred things could have happened. On one station a freak magnetic field that had not shown up on the first survey had drifted over the site, deranged the protective barrier and left the team wide open to attack. One sight of the wreckage and he had known that search was useless.

Here trouble looked like the survey team's own fault. In some way these two had ignored the safety rules and gotten themselves chopped.

One thing was for sure—Javeh couldn't leave all the gear there. It could last for centuries and would upset the locals.

He said, "Range about a bit. Show me across the river."

At first there was nothing. Then the operator picked up movement among the trees and zoomed down for a close up. He found a busy group. Twenty or more lightly furred, advanced hominids—men, women and children on a corporate chore—were building a large frame structure.

Two were taller, whiter, more erect.

Javeh said, "Hold it there. Get closer."

"That's as far as I can go, Commander."

"It's enough. By God, they've gone native. Building a rustic bower. I'd never have believed it possible. That settles it. Give me a voice beam to that area and call the gunner."

The duty gunner in his pod above the command dome had seen the action on his duplicate screen and knew what to expect.

Javeh said, "Stand by. Destroy every item at the campsite as soon as I've finished."

On his outside circuit he addressed the working party in a voice that boomed from the tree tops and stopped the action. There was a scurry for cover. Only two remained, hand in hand looking at the empty sky.

"Atan and Ava this is Javeh. You have put yourselves outside the law. I ought to kill you, but I should have to destroy innocent people near you. As it is you will have to make what you can of your choice. It is likely to be brutish and short. If you have any thought for the future you will see that you leave no children. Goodbye."

A zigzag of eye-aching light played on the campsite and the

crown of the low hill seemed to burn without fire. For a brief hypnotic spell nothing changed. Then every item folded silently in on itself and there was only fine ash spiraling in the gently moving air and water boiling at the river's edge.

AVA was crying silently, tears running unheeded down her cheeks and going into free fall. Mainly it was for Atan. He had worked like a dog on the mission and all his careful records were turned to dust. Partly it was for a situation where he and she could be written off without appeal by a snap decision.

Partly also it was because they were so near success. Atan had reckoned that the best chance was to build a tower on the river side of the screen, so that he could drop over into two meters of water to break his fall.

Making friendly contact with the family clan had been tricky enough, but he had done it, working against time. Another twenty-four hours and they would have been home and dry.

Now they were on their own and it was her fault. Which reminded her that she had never gotten around to telling him what she had done.

She said, "Atan. It's all my fault.

Don't blame yourself. Nobody could have done a better job than you did. What's happened is unfair to you, not to me. I deserve it."

She was marshaling the story line to tell him from the beginning, but he turned her towards him, hands on her shoulders, bent his arms until she had to move her feet and close up.

"Don't torment yourself, Ava. Relax. What do we have? So much time either here or on Bromius. What does it matter when you get right down to it? We have ourselves and that's all there is. Not many people get to start over. It's a rebirth. Naked we come into the world. Believe me, I have everything I want right here. Whatever you did, I don't want to know. You did me a favor. If you feel about me the way I feel about you we don't have a problem—we have the ingredients for a new golden age."

Curious hominids were edging cautiously back out of the bush, their attention divided between the gray-capped empty knoll and the couple by the frame tower.

Ava had linked her fingers behind his head.

She said, "Atan."

It was an amen, a benediction, an affirmation, a prophesy that the wilderness could be made to flower like any lotus. •

HUE AND CRY

(continued from page 3)

have little in common, except, I guess, artistic creativeness. Nothing to compare to the unifying basis for the life arts. Life arts could be a subdivision of fine arts.

The definition of art (or life art) is then plain:

Art equals direct and indirect Dramatic Illusion, or any combination of these. (See IF, Oct. '71, p. 176).

I also now have derived the definition for ars poetica from the previous analysis of "bad fiction" (God forgive you!).

Poem: A verbally symmetrical, audio-metrical Indirect Dramatic Illusion.

That is to say: it is a literary work that accentuates verbal symmetry (strictly to loosely metrically proportioned) to a degree inconsistent with the natural dramatic requirements of the story or account, thereby attempting to inject or create esthetically pleasing sound patterns to enhance the value of the work or performance. And it can be pleasing to the senses and intellect.

*Henry Bitman
Azusa, Cal.*

Fiction, which has been my sole source of livelihood for thirty-five years, has a hard and graspable reality of its own. Good fiction is

art and simulates nothing—it simply is its own valid self. Bad fiction may pretend to simulate other things—and is a lie.

Let fiction create illusions for you if you enjoy them, but I think you will enhance your appreciation if you can bring yourself also to view it on its own merits.

Dear If:

Last year I appealed to readers of a number of magazines, pro and fan, for help in locating, for

READERS with long memories have written or called to inform us that the story *To Kill A Venusian*, which appeared in the September-October issue of IF, is in fact a plagiarism.

We have confirmed that the original was published by **FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION** in its August 1952 issue, the title being *Nine-Finger Jack*. The author was the late Anthony Boucher.

IF purchased the story in good faith from one Irwin Ross of Chicago, Ill. The matter has been turned over to Company Counsel for appropriate action.

—THE EDITORS

biographical purposes, unpublished letters by H. P. Lovecraft. Thanks in part to these readers' generous assistance, I am now saturated with HPL material (77+ pp of photocopies and notes on additional letters). I am still, however, trying to run down unpublished letters by Robert E. Howard (other than those in possession of my colleague Glenn Lord) and Clark Ashton Smith. Any information as to the whereabouts of such letters will be much appreciated.

Kaor,
L. Sprague de Camp
278 Hothorpe Lane
Villanova, Pa. 10085

Dear Sir:

I have two strong complaints regarding the August issue of If: (1) you say in Hue and Cry that Bode

has not been appearing in Galaxy because readers did not like his comic strip; does that mean he shouldn't illustrate covers and stories as he did so well previously? (2) Please stop cluttering Galaxy and IF with fantasy by people like Davidson. How can a science-fiction magazine publish a story with a name like Arnten of Ultima Thule? Worlds of Fantasy was created to take care of this kind of complaint. So what happened?

Jonathan Raz
Berkeley, Cal.

The comment to which you refer (*Hue and Cry*, August '71) read: "... reader reaction did not encourage us to continue featuring a cartoon strip." It was intended to convey precisely what it said, no more, no less.

Worlds of Fantasy did not come into being to take care of complaints but to publish fantasy. In the recent poll conducted in *Galaxy* a substantial majority of readers expressed a liking for occasional fantasy in their sf fare. My personal feeling is that it should be extremely occasional and should have merits beyond its category—express some validities found in the world of realities.

The phrasing of your letter suggests I ought to have changed Avram Davidson's title for the story. I don't agree.

—JAKOBSSON

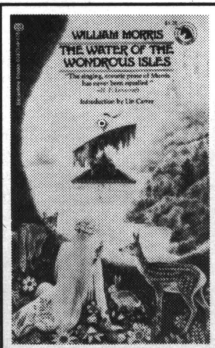
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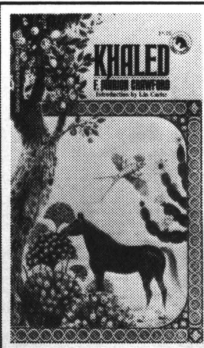
—THE EDITORS

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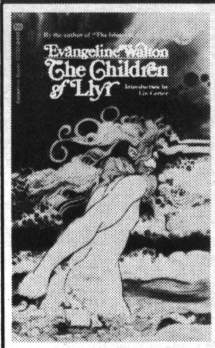
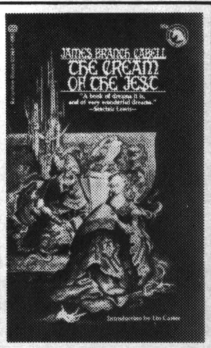
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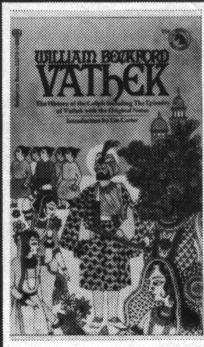
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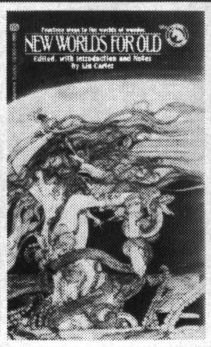
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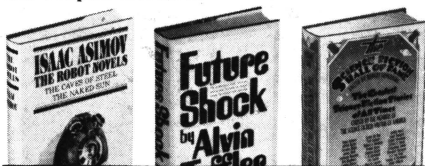
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