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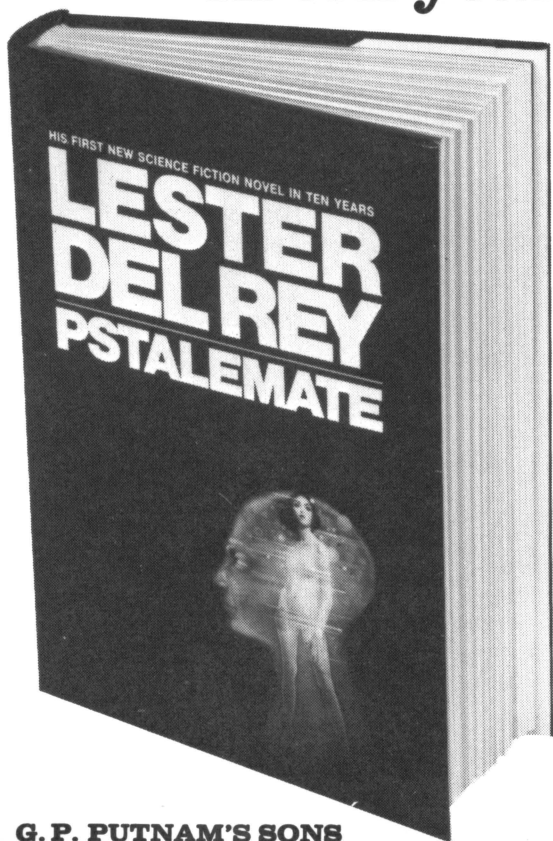
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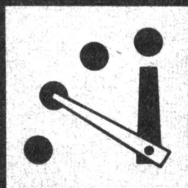
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**HUE
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Readers write—and wrong!

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

Michael Glycer states in the October, 1971, issue of If, in so many words, that science fiction is not art. This is a point I have often discussed with friends, who have mostly taken the same attitude. My answer to this is that art in writing shows itself rarely anyway (let's assume for the moment that we know what we mean by art) and that if you single out any special category of writing, e.g. sf or detective stories or westerns, the proportion that we recognize as artistic will always be rather small—simply because the proportion of art in all writing is small. I believe that sf has produced quite a bit of art—such stuff as Miller's "Canticle for Leibowitz" and the best of Sturgeon's work come immediately to my mind—and it's not realistic to expect all sf to measure up to these standards. This argument applies to all artistic endeavours, incidentally—for the same reasons it is not fair to declare, say, modern music, jazz,

pop-music, modern painting, etc etc, as non-art.

While I'm at it, some comments on If and Galaxy. I find your serials uniformly boring lately—the authors all seem to run out of steam shortly after (mostly) promising beginnings. Examples: I Will Fear No Evil, the Dune series and that Laumer story about a year back, whose name I've forgotten. I think Laumer should drop Retief—he's played out and will never again rise to such heights as in the beautiful "Retief's War." While I'm an enthusiastic Australian (with reservations in the field of politics), I consider Chandler's stories also uniformly boring—a pity. Otherwise, I'm happy with your editing.

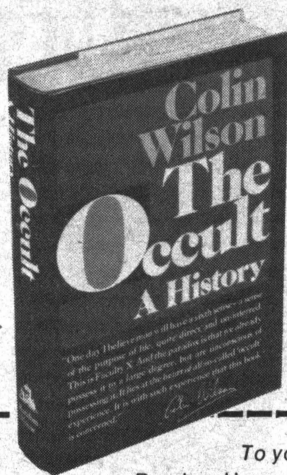
*Dieter Britz
Germany*

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

Science fiction people have always prided themselves in their belief that their genre alone is concerned with future extrapolation and possibilities. Yet who has written the most significant and important book of many, many years concerning the future? Future Shock is by Alvin Toffler, a sociologist—and blessed be his insight. Why weren't all the probabilities

(Please turn to page 175)

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ISAAC ASIMOV

THE GODS THEMSELVES

PART TWO



From the book **THE GODS THEMSELVES**
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SYNOPSIS OF PART I
(Galaxy, March, 1972)

Plutonium-186, an "impossible" isotope, is nevertheless discovered on Earth. It develops that alien intelligence in a parallel Universe is exchanging the substance for our ordinary tungsten. Here the unstable P-186 breaks down to tungsten while there the tungsten breaks down to P-186. This releases atomic particles that soon furnish limitless pollution-free energy, at no cost, to both Universes—contributing immensely to human welfare and presumably that of the aliens. But one Earth scientist warns that continually "pumping" electrons out of our Universe into the "para-Universe" will alter both with ultimately disastrous consequences. He finds his career blasted by a scientific establishment committed to material posterity. . .

(Part II of *The Gods Themselves*, is set entirely in the alternate or para-Universe devoid of humankind. Belonging in *The Magazine of Alternatives* on several counts, it can be read and enjoyed for its own sake. For fullest appreciation of this wise and significant novel, of course, you may wish to take advantage of the offer on page 71 and read the entire work upon its first publication anywhere.)

1a

DUA did not have much trouble leaving the others. She always expected trouble, but somehow it never came. Never real trouble.

But then, why should it?

Odeen objected in his lofty way. "Stay put," he would say. "You know you annoy Tritt." He never spoke of his own annoyance—Rationals did not become annoyed over trifles. Still, Odeen hovered over Tritt almost as persistently as Tritt hovered over the children.

But Odeen always let Dua have her way if she were persistent enough. He would even intercede in her favor with Tritt. Sometimes he went so far as to admit he was proud of her ability, of her independence. He was not a bad Left-ling, she thought with absent affection.

Tritt was harder to handle and had a sour way of looking at her when she was—well, when she was as she wished to be. But Right-lings were like that. He was a Right-ling to her, but a Parental to the children and the latter took precedence always. Which was good because she could always count on one child or another taking him away when things became uncomfortable.

Still, Dua did not mind Tritt very much. Except for melting, she tended to ignore him. Odeen was something else. He had been exciting at first—his presence alone had made her outlines shimmer and fade. And the fact that he was a Rational made him somehow all the more exciting. She didn't understand her reaction to what he was—it was part of her queerness. She had grown used to her queerness—almost.

Dua sighed.

As a child, when she still had thought of herself as an individual

—a single being and not a part of a triad—she had been much more aware of the strangeness. As little a thing as the surface at evening.

She had loved the surface at evening. The other Emotionals had called it cold and gloomy and had quivered and coalesced when she described it for them. They were ready enough to emerge in the warmth of midday and stretch and feed—but they were exactly what made the midday dull. Dua did not like to be around the twittering lot of them.

She had to eat, of course, but she liked it much better in the evening when there was very little food but everything was a dim, deep red and she was alone. Of course, she had described it as colder and more wistful than it was when she had talked to the others. She had liked to watch them grow hard-edged as they imagined the chill—or as hard-edged as young Emotionals could. And after a while they had begun to whisper about her and laugh at her—and leave her alone.

The small Sun was at the horizon now, with the secret ruddiness that she alone was there to see. She spread herself out laterally and thickened dorso-ventrally, absorbing the traces of thin warmth. She munched at it idly, savoring the slightly sour, substanceless taste of the long wavelengths. (She had never met another Emotional who would admit to liking it. But she could never explain that she associated it with freedom—freedom from the others, a time she could spend alone.)

Even now the loneliness, the chill and the deep, deep red, brought back those old days before the triad—and even more, quite sharply, the memory of her own Parental who would come lumbering after her, forever fearful that she would hurt herself.

He had been carefully devoted to her, as Parentals always were to their Little-mids. His devotion had annoyed her and she had dreamed of the day when he would leave her—Parentals always did eventually. But how she had missed him when one day he finally left.

He had come to tell her just as carefully as he could, despite the difficulty Parentals had in putting their feelings into words. She had run from him that day—not in malice and not because she suspected what he had to tell her—only out of joy. She had managed to find a special place at mid-day and had gorged herself in unexpected isolation and had been filled with a queer, itching sensation that demanded motion and activity. She had slithered over the rocks and had let her edges overlap theirs. She had known it was a grossly improper action for anyone but a baby and yet it had been something at once exciting and soothing.

And her Parental had caught her at last and had stood before her, silent for a long time, making his eyes small and dense as though to stop every bit of light reflected from her—to see as much as he could of her and for as long as possible. So vividly did that earlier

time return that suddenly she could see it as if it were now . . .

AT FIRST she just stared back at her Parental with the confused thought that he had seen her rub through the rocks and was ashamed of her. But she caught no shame aura and finally asked subduedly, "What is it, Daddy?"

"Why, Dua, it's the time. I've been expecting it. Surely you have."

"What time?" Now that the moment was here, Dua stubbornly would not let herself know. If she refused to know, there would be nothing to know. (She never quite got out of that habit. Odeen said all Emotionals were like that, speaking in the lofty voice he used sometimes when he was particularly overcome with the importance of being a Rational.)

Her Parental said, "I must pass on. I will not be with you any more." Then he just stood and looked at her and she could say nothing.

He said, "You will tell the others."

"Why?" Dua turned away rebelliously, her outlines vague and growing vaguer—she tried to dissipate. She wanted to dissipate altogether and of course she couldn't. After a while the effort hurt and cramped and she hardened again. Her Parental didn't even bother to scold her and tell her that it would be shameful if anyone saw her stretched out so.

She said, "They won't care—" and immediately felt sorrowful that her Parental would be hurt by the

words. He still called her brothers "Little-left" and "Little-right," but Little-left was all involved with his studies and Little-right kept talking about forming a triad. Dua was the only one of the three who still felt . . . Well, she was the youngest. Emotional always were and with them everything was different.

Her Parental merely said, "You will tell them anyway." And he and she again stood looking at each other.

She didn't want to tell her brothers. They weren't close any more. It had been different when they were all little. They could hardly tell themselves apart in those days—Left-brother from Right-brother from Mid-sister. They were all wispy and would tangle with each other and roll through each other and hide in the walls.

No one ever minded their games when they were little—none of the grownups. But then the brothers grew thick and sober and drew away. And when she complained to her Parental he would only say gently, "You are too old to thin, Dua."

She tried not to listen, but Left-brother kept drawing away and would say, "Don't snuggle—I have no time for you." And Right-brother began to stay quite hard all the time and became glum and silent. She did not understand it yet and Daddy had not been able to make it clear. He would say every once in a while as though giving her a lesson he had once learned, "Lefts are Rationals, Dua.

Rights are Parentals. They grow up their own way."

She didn't like their way. They were no longer children and she still was, so she flocked with the other Emotional. They all had the same complaints about their brothers. They all talked of coming triads. They all spread in the Sun and fed. They all grew more and more the same and every day the same things were said.

And she began to detest them and went off by herself whenever she could, so that they took to calling her "Left-Em." (It had been a long time now since she had heard that call, but she never thought of the phrase without remembering perfectly the thin ragged voices that had sent it after her with a kind of half-wit persistence because the owners of the voices knew it hurt.)

But her Parental had retained his interest in her even when it must have seemed to him that everyone else laughed at her. He had tried in his clumsy way to shield her from the others. He had followed her to the surface sometimes—even though he hated it himself—in order to make sure she was safe.

She had come upon him once when he was talking to a Hard One. It was hard for a Parental to talk to a Hard One—even though she was quite young, she knew that much. Hard Ones talked only to Rationals.

She had been quite frightened and had wisped away, but not before she had heard her Parental say, "I take good care of her, Hard-Sir."

Could the Hard One have in-

quired about her? About her queer-ness, perhaps? But her Parental had not been apologetic. Even to the Hard One he had spoken of his concern for her. Dua had felt an obscure pride.

But now he was leaving and suddenly all the independence that Dua had been looking forward to lost its fine shape and hardened into the pointed crag of loneliness.

She asked, "But why must you pass on?"

"I must, little Mid-dear."

He must. She knew that. Everyone, sooner or later, must. The day would come when she would have to sigh and say, *I must*.

"But what makes you know when you have to pass on? If you can choose your time why don't you choose a different time and stay longer?"

He said, "Your Left-father has decided. The triad must do as he says."

"Why must you do as he says?" She hardly ever saw her Left-father or her Mid-mother. They did not count any more. Only her Right-father, her Parental, her daddy, who stood there squat and flat-surfaced. He was not all smoothly curved like a Rational or shuddery uneven like an Emotional and she could always tell what he was going to say. Almost always.

She was sure he would say, *I can't explain to a little Emotional*.

He said it.

Dua said in a burst of woe, "I'll miss you, I know you think I pay you no attention and that I don't like you because you always tell me not to do things. But I would

rather not like you for telling me not to do things than not have you around to tell me not to do things."

And Daddy just stood there. There was no way he could handle an outburst like that except to come closer and pinch out a hand. That action cost him a visible effort, but he held his hand out trembling and its outlines were ever so slightly soft.

Dua said, "Oh, Daddy—" and let her own hand flow about his so that it looked misty and shimmering through her substance, but she was careful not to touch it for that would have embarrassed him so.

Then he withdrew his hand and left hers enclosing nothing.

He said, "Remember the Hard Ones, Dua. They will help you. I—I will go now."

He went and she never saw him again.

Now she sat remembering in the Sunset, rebelliously aware that pretty soon Tritt would grow petulant over her absence and nag Odeen.

And then Odeen might lecture her on her duties.

She didn't care.

1b

O DEEN was moderately aware that Dua was off on the surface. Without really thinking about it he could judge her direction and even something of her distance. If he had stopped to think of it he might have felt displeasure, for this inter-awareness sense had been steadily deadening for a long time

now and, without really being certain why, he had a sense of gathering fulfillment about it. It was the way things were supposed to be—the sign of the continuing development of the body with age.

Tritt's inter-awareness sense did not decrease, but it shifted more and more toward the children. That was clearly the line of useful development. But the role of the Parental was a simple one, in a manner of speaking, however important. The Rational was far more complex and Odeen took a bleak satisfaction in that thought.

Of course, Dua was the real puzzle. She was so unlike all the other Emotional. Her oddness perplexed and frustrated Tritt and reduced him to even more pronounced inarticulateness. Dua baffled and frustrated Odeen at times, too, but he was also aware of her infinite capacity to induce satisfaction with life and it did not seem likely that one quality was independent of the other. The occasional exasperation she caused was a small price to pay for intense happiness.

And maybe Dua's strange way of life was part of what ought to be, too. The Hard Ones seemed interested in her and ordinarily they paid attention only to Rationals. He felt pride in that—so much the better for the triad that even the Emotional was worth attention.

Odeen was pleased.

Things were as they were supposed to be. That was bedrock and what he wanted most to feel—even to the end. Some day he would even know when it was time to pass on

and he would want to. The Hard Ones assured him of that, as they assured all Rationals, but they also told him that it was his own inner consciousness that would mark the time unmistakably and without any advice from outside.

"When you tell yourself," Losten had told him in the clear, careful way in which a Hard One always talked to a Soft One, as though the Hard One were laboring to make himself understood, "that you know why you must pass on—then you will pass on, and your triad will pass on with you."

And Odeen had said, "I cannot say I wish to pass on now, Hard-Sir. There is so much to learn."

"Of course, Left-dear. You feel this because you are not yet ready."

Odeen thought, *How can I ever feel ready when I will never feel there isn't much to learn.*

But he did not say so. He was quite certain the time would come and he would then understand.

He looked down at himself, almost forgetting and thrusting out an eye to do so—always some childish impulses remained in the most adult of the most Rational. He did not have to use an eye, of course. He could sense quite well with his eye solidly in place, and he found himself satisfactorily solid—in nice, sharp outline, smooth, and curved into gracefully conjoined ovoids.

His body lacked the strangely attractive shimmer of Dua's and the comforting stockiness of Tritt's. He loved them both, but he would not change his own body for either's. Or, of course, his mind.

He would never say so, for he would not want to hurt their feelings, but he never ceased being thankful that he did not have Tritt's limited understanding or (even more) Dūa's erratic one. He supposed they did not mind—for they knew nothing else.

HE GREW distantly aware of Dūa again and deliberately dulled the sense. At the moment he felt no need for her. It was not that he wanted her less, merely that he had increasing drives elsewhere. It was part of the growing maturity of a Rational to find more and more satisfaction in the exercise of a mind that could be exerted to capacity only alone—and with the Hard Ones.

He grew constantly more accustomed to the Hard Ones, constantly more attached to them. He felt that this, too, was right and proper, for he was a Rational, and in a way the Hard Ones were super-Rationals. (He had once said that to Losten, the friendliest of the Hard Ones and, it seemed to Odeen in some vague way, the youngest. Losten had radiated amusement but had said nothing. He had not denied it, however.)

Odeen's earliest memories were filled with Hard Ones. His Parental more and more concentrated his attention on the last child, the baby-Emotional. That was only natural. (Tritt would do the same when the last child came, if it ever did. Odeen had picked up that last qualification from Tritt, who used it constantly as a reproach to Dūa.)

But with his Parental busy so

much of the time Odeen had begun his education early. He was losing his baby ways and he had learned a great deal even before he met Tritt.

That meeting, though, was surely something he would never forget. It might as well have been yesterday as more than half a lifetime ago. He had seen Parentals of his own generation, of course—young ones who, long before they incubated the children that made true Parentals of them, showed few signs of the stolidity to come. As a child he had played with his own right-brother and was scarcely aware of any intellectual difference between them (though, looking back on those days, he recognized that the difference was there, even then.)

He knew also vaguely the role of a Parental in a triad. Even as a child he had heard whispered tales of melting.

When Tritt first appeared—when Odeen saw him first—everything changed. For the first time in his life Odeen felt an inner warmth and began to think that there was something he wanted that was utterly divorced from thought. Even now he could remember the sense of embarrassment that had accompanied this discovery.

Tritt was not embarrassed, of course. Parentals were never embarrassed about the activities of the triad, and Emotionals were almost never embarrassed. Only Rationals had that problem.

"Too much thinking," a Hard One had said when Odeen had discussed the problem with him

and that left Odeen dissatisfied. In what way would thinking be "too much?"

Tritt was young when they first met. He was still so childish as to be uncertain in his blockishness so that his reaction to the meeting was embarrassingly clear. He grew almost translucent along his edges.

Odeen said hesitantly, "I haven't seen you before, have I, Right-fellow?"

Tritt said, "I have never been here. I have been brought here."

They both knew exactly what had happened to them. The meeting had been arranged because someone (some Parental, Odeen had thought at the time, but later he knew it was some Hard One) thought they would suit each other and the thought was correct.

There was no intellectual rapport between the two. How could there be when Odeen wanted to learn with an intensity that superseded anything but the existence of the triad itself and Tritt lacked the very concept of learning? What Tritt had to know he already knew beyond either learning or unlearning.

Odeen, out of the excitement of finding out about the world and its Sun—about the history and mechanism of life, about all the abouts in the Universe—sometimes (in those early days together) found himself spilling his enthusiasm over to Tritt.

Tritt listened placidly, clearly understanding nothing, but content to be listening while Odeen, transmitting nothing, was as clearly content to be lecturing.

IT WAS Tritt who made the first move, driven by his special needs. Odeen was chattering about what he had learned that day after the brief midday meal. (Their thicker substance absorbed food so rapidly that they were satisfied with a simple walk in the Sun, while Emotionals basked for hours at a time, curling and thinning as though deliberately to lengthen the task.)

Odeen, who always ignored the Emotionals, was quite happy to be talking. Tritt, who stared wordlessly at them day after day, was now visibly restless.

Abruptly he came close to Odeen, formed an appendage so hastily as to clash most disagreeably with Odeen's form-sense. He placed the outcropping upon a portion of Odeen's upper ovoid where a slight shimmer was allowing for a welcome draft of warm air as dessert. Tritt's appendage thinned with a visible effort and sank into the superficialities of Odeen's skin before the latter darted away, horribly embarrassed.

He had done such things as a baby, of course, but never since his adolescence. "Don't do that, Tritt," he said sharply.

Tritt's appendage remained out, groping a little. "I want to."

Odeen held himself as compactly as he could, striving to harden the surface to bar entry. "I don't want to."

"Why not?" asked Tritt urgently. "There's nothing wrong."

Odeen said the first thing that came into his mind. "It hurt." (It didn't really. Not physically. But

the Hard Ones always avoided the touch of the Soft Ones. A careless interpenetration did hurt Hard Ones, but they were constructed differently from Soft Ones—completely differently.)

Tritt was not fooled. His instinct could not possibly mislead him in this respect. He said, "It didn't hurt."

"Well, it isn't right this way. We need an Emotional."

And Tritt could only say stubbornly, "I want to, anyway."

It was bound to continue happening and Odeen was bound to give in. It always came about so—even with the most self-conscious Rational. As the old saying had it—Everyone either admitted doing it or lied about it.

Tritt was at him at each meeting after that—if not with an appendage, then rim to rim. And finally Odeen, seduced by the pleasure of it, began to help and tried to thin. He was better at that than Tritt. Poor Tritt, infinitely more eager, huffed and strained and could achieve only the barest shimmer here and there, patchily and raggedly.

Odeen, however, could turn translucent all over his surface and fought down his embarrassment in order to let himself flow against Tritt. There was skin-deep penetration and Odeen could feel the pulsing of Tritt's hard surface under the skin. There was enjoyment, riddled with guilt.

Tritt, as often as not, was tired and vaguely angry when it was over.

Odeen said, "Now, Tritt, I've

told you we need an Emotional to do this properly. You can't be angry at something that just is."

And Tritt said, "Let's get an Emotional."

Let's get an Emotional! Tritt's simple drives never led him to anything but direct action. Odeen was not sure he could explain the complexities of life to the other.

"It's not that easy, Right-ling—" he began gently.

Tritt said abruptly. "The Hard Ones can get us one. You're friendly with them. Ask them."

Odeen was horrified. "I can't ask. The time," he continued, unconsciously falling into his lecturing voice, "has not yet come—or I would certainly know it. Until—"

Tritt was not listening. He said, "I'll ask."

"No," said Odeen, horrified. "You stay out of it. I tell you it's not time. I have an education to worry about. It's very easy to be a Parental and not to have to know anything but—"

He was sorry the instant he had spoken, and it was a lie anyway. He just didn't want to do anything at all that might offend the Hard Ones and impede his useful relationship with them. Tritt, however, showed no signs of minding, and Odeen began to think that the other saw no point or merit in knowing anything he did not already know and would not consider the statement of the fact an insult.

The problem of the Emotional kept coming up, though. Occasionally they tried interpenetration. In fact, the impulse grew stronger with time. It was never truly satis-

fyng though it had its pleasure and each time Tritt would demand an Emotional. Each time Odeen threw himself deeper into his studies, almost as a defense against the problem.

Yet at times he was tempted to speak to Losten about the problem.

LOSTEN was the Hard One Odeen knew best, the one who took the greatest personal interest in him. There was a deadly sameness about the Hard Ones, because they did not change. They never changed—their form was fixed. Where their eyes were they always were—and always in the same place for all of them. Their skin was not exactly hard, but it was always opaque. It never shimmered, was never vague, never penetrable by another skin of its own type.

Hard Ones were not larger in size, particularly, than the Soft Ones, but they were heavier. Their substance was much denser and they had to be careful about the yielding tissues of the Soft Ones.

Once when he had been little—really little—and his body had flowed almost as freely as his sister's, Odeen had been approached by a Hard One. He had never known which one it was, but he learned in later life that all of them were curious about baby-Rationals. Odeen had reached up for the Hard One out of nothing but curiosity. The Hard One had sprung backward, and later Odeen's Parental had scolded him for offering to touch a Hard One.

The scolding had been harsh enough for Odeen never to forget.

When he was older he learned that the close-packed atoms of the Hard One's tissues felt pain on the forcible penetration of others. Odeen wondered if the Soft One felt pain, too. Another young Rational once told him that he had stumbled against a Hard One and the Hard One had doubled up but that he himself had felt nothing—but Odeen wasn't sure this was not just a melodramatic boast.

There were other things he was not supposed to do. He liked rubbing against the walls of the cavern. There was a pleasant, warm feeling when he allowed himself to penetrate rock. Babies always did it, but it became harder to do as he grew older. Still, he could do it skin-deep and he liked the feeling, but his Parental found him doing it and scolded him. Odeen objected that his sister did it all the time—he had seen her.

"That's different," said the Parental. "She's an Emotional."

At another time when Odeen was absorbing a recording—he was older then—he had idly formed a couple of projections and made the tips so thin that he could pass one through the other. He began to do it regularly when he listened. There was a pleasant tickling sensation that made it easier to listen and made him nicely sleepy afterward.

His Parental caught him at that, too, and what he had said still made Odeen uncomfortable.

No one really told him about melting in those days. They fed him knowledge and educated him about everything except about what

the triad was. Tritt had never been told either, but he was a Parental and knew without being told. Of course, when Dua came at last all was clear, even though she seemed to know less than Odeen.

But she did not come to them because of anything Odeen did. It was Tritt who broached the matter—Tritt, who ordinarily feared the Hard Ones and avoided them mutely—Tritt, who lacked Odeen's self-assurance in all but this respect—Tritt, who on this one subject was driven—Tritt—Tritt—Tritt—

Odeen sighed. Tritt was invading his thoughts because Tritt was coming. He could feel him, harsh, demanding, always demanding. Odeen had so little time to himself these days, just when he felt that he needed to think more than ever.

"Yes, Tritt," he said.

1c

TRITT was conscious of his blockiness. He did not think it ugly. He did not think about it at all. If he had given it a thought, he would have considered it beautiful. His body was designed for a purpose and designed well.

He asked, "Odeen, where is Dua?"

"Outside somewhere," mumbled Odeen, almost as though he didn't care. It annoyed Tritt to have the triad made so little of. Dua was so difficult and Odeen didn't care.

"Why do you let her go?"

"How can I stop her, Tritt? And what harm if she goes outside?"

"You know the harm. We have

two babies. We need a third. It is so hard to make a little-mid these days. Dua must be properly fed for it to be made. Now she is wandering about at Sunset again. How can she feed fully at Sunset?"

"She's just not a great feeder."

"And we just don't have a little-mid. Odeen." Tritt's voice was caressing. "How can I love you properly without Dua?"

"Now, then," mumbled Odeen and Tritt felt himself once more puzzled by the other's clear embarrassment at the simplest statement of fact.

Tritt said, "Remember, I was the one who first got Dua." Did Odeen remember that? Did Odeen ever think of the triad and what it meant? Sometimes Tritt felt so frustrated he could—he could—Actually, he did not know what he could do, but he knew he felt frustrated. As in those old days when he wanted an Emotional and Odeen would do nothing.

Tritt knew he didn't have the trick of talking in big, elaborate sentences. But if Parentals didn't talk, they thought. They thought about important things. Odeen always talked about atoms and energy. Who cared about atoms and energy? Tritt thought about the triad and the babies.

Odeen had once told him that the numbers of Soft Ones were gradually growing fewer. Didn't he care? Didn't the Hard Ones care? Did anyone care but the Parentals?

Only two forms of life on all the world, the Soft Ones and the Hard Ones. And food shining down on them.

Odeen had once told him the Sun was cooling off. There was less food, he said, so there were fewer people. Tritt didn't believe it. The Sun felt no cooler than it had when he was a baby. People were just not worrying about the triads any more. Too many absorbed Rationals—too many silly Emotionals.

What the Soft Ones must do was concentrate on the important things of life. Tritt did. He tended to the business of the triad. The baby-left came, then the baby-right. They were growing and flourishing. They had to have a baby-mid, though. That was the hardest to get started and without a baby-mid there would be no new triad.

What made Dua as she was? She had always been difficult, but she was growing worse.

Tritt felt an obscure anger against Odeen. Odeen always talked with all those hard words. And Dua listened. Odeen would talk to Dua endlessly till they were almost two Rationals. That was bad for the triad.

Odeen should know better.

It was always Tritt who had to care. It was always Tritt who had to do what had to be done. Odeen was the friend of the Hard Ones and yet he said nothing. They had needed an Emotional and Odeen had done nothing. He talked to the Hard Ones about energy and not of the needs of the triad.

It had been Tritt, who had turned the scale. Tritt remembered that proudly. He had seen Odeen talking to a Hard One, and he had approached. Without a shake in his voice, he had interrupted and said,

"We need an Emotional."

The Hard One had turned to look at him. Tritt had never been so close to a Hard One. He was all of a piece. Every part of him had to turn when one part did. He had some projections that could move by themselves, but they never changed in shape. They never flowed and they were irregular and unlovely. Hard Ones did not like to be touched.

The Hard One asked, "Is this so, Odeen?" He did not speak to Tritt.

Odeen flattened. He flattened close to the ground, became more flattened than Tritt had ever seen him.

Odeen said, "My Right-ling is overzealous. My Right-ling is— is—" He stuttered and puffed and could not speak.

Tritt could speak. He said, "We cannot melt without one."

Tritt knew that Odeen was embarrassed into speechlessness but he didn't care. It was time.

"Well, Left-dear," said the Hard One to Odeen, "do you feel the same way about it?" Hard Ones spoke as the Soft Ones did, but more harshly and with fewer overtones. The Hard Ones were difficult to listen to. Tritt found them so anyway, though Odeen seemed used to them.

"Yes," said Odeen finally.

The Hard One turned at last to Tritt. "Remind me, Young-right How long have you and Odeen been together?"

"Long enough," said Tritt, "to deserve an Emotional." He kept his shape firmly at angles. He did

not allow himself to be frightened. The matter was too important. He added: "And my name is Tritt."

The Hard One seemed amused. "Yes, the choice was good. You and Odeen go well together, but it makes the choice of an Emotional difficult. We have almost made up our minds. Or at least I have long since made up my mind, but the others must be convinced. Be patient, Tritt."

"I am tired of patience."

"I know, but be patient anyway." He was amused again.

WHEN the Hard One was quite gone Odeen uplifted himself and thinned out angrily. He asked, "How could you do that, Tritt? Do you know who he is?"

"A Hard One."

"He is Losten. My special teacher. I don't want him angry with me."

"Why should he be angry? I was polite."

"Well, never mind." Odeen was settling into normal shape. That meant he was not angry any more. (Tritt was relieved, though he tried not to show it.) "It's very embarrassing for my dumb-right to come up and speak out to my Hard One."

"Why didn't you speak out, then?"

"There's such a thing as the right time."

"But never's the right time for you."

But then they rubbed surfaces and stopped arguing and Dua came not long after that.

Losten brought her. Tritt did not realize—he did not look at the

Hard One. Only at Dua. But Odeen told him afterward that Losten had brought her.

"You see?" said Tritt. "I talked to him. That is why he brought her."

"No," said Odeen. "It was time. He would have brought her even if neither of us had talked to him."

Tritt didn't believe him. He was quite sure that it was entirely because of his actions that Dua was with them.

Surely there had never been anyone like Dua in the world. Tritt had seen many Emotionals. They were all attractive. He would have accepted any of them for proper melting. Once he saw Dua he realized that none of the others would have suited. Only Dua. Only Dua.

And Dua knew exactly what to do. Exactly. No one had ever shown her how, she told them afterward. No one had ever talked to her about it. Even other Emotionals had not, for she had avoided them.

Yet when all three were together, each knew what to do.

Dua thinned. She thinned more than Tritt had ever seen anyone thin. She thinned more than Tritt would ever have thought possible. She became a kind of colored smoke that filled the room and dazzled him. He moved without knowing he was moving. He immersed himself in the air that was Dua.

There was no sensation of penetration, none at all. Tritt felt no resistance, no friction. There was just a floating inward and a rapid palpitation. He felt himself

beginning to thin in sympathy and without the tremendous effort that had always accompanied his thinning. With Dua filling him he could thin without effort into a thick smoke of his own. Thinning became like flowing—he became an enormous smooth flow.

Dimly he could see Odeen approaching from the other side, from Dua's left. And he, too, was thinning.

Then, like all the shocks of contact in all the world, he reached Odeen. But it was not a shock at all. Tritt felt without feeling, knew without knowing. He slid into Odeen and Odeen slid into him. He could not tell whether he was surrounding Odeen or being surrounded by him or both or neither.

He knew only—pleasure.

The senses dimmed with the intensity of that pleasure, and at the point where he thought he could stand no more the senses failed altogether.

EVENTUALLY they separated and stared at each other. They had melted for days. Melting always took time. The better it was the longer it took. When the melting was over, all that time seemed as though it had been an instant and they did not remember it. In later life it rarely took longer than that first time.

Odeen said, "That was wonderful."

Tritt only gazed at Dua, who had made it possible.

She was coalescing, swirling, moving tremulously. She seemed

most affected of the three.

"We'll do it again," she said, hurriedly. "But later, later. Let me go now."

She ran away. They did not stop her. They were too overcome to stop her. But that was always the way afterward. She was always gone after melting. No matter how successful it was, she would go. Something in her needed to be alone.

It bothered Tritt. In point after point she was different from other Emotionals. She should not be.

Odeen felt otherwise. He would say on many occasions, "Why don't you leave her alone, Tritt? She's not like the others and that means she's better than the others. Melting wouldn't be as good if she were like the others. Do you want the benefits without paying the price?"

Tritt did not understand that clearly. He knew only that she ought to do what ought to be done.

He said, "I want her to do what is right."

"I know, Tritt, I know. But leave her alone anyway."

Odeen himself often scolded Dua for her queer ways but he was always unwilling to let Tritt do so.

"You laek tact, Tritt," he would say.

Tritt didn't know what tact was exactly.

And now— It had been so long since the first melting and still the baby-Emotional was not born. How much longer? It was already much too long. And Dua, if anything, stayed by herself more and more as time went on.

Tritt said, "She doesn't eat enough."

"When it's time—" began Odeen.

"You always talk about it's being time or it's not being time. You never found it time to get Dua in the first place. Now you never find it time to have a baby-Emotional. Dua should—"

But Odeen turned away. He said, "She's out there, Tritt. If you want to go out and get her, as though you were her Parental instead of her Right-ling, do so. But I say, leave her alone."

Tritt backed away. He had a great deal to say, but he didn't know how to say it.

2a

DUA was aware of the left-right agitation concerning her in a dim and faraway manner and her rebelliousness grew.

If one or the other—or both—came to get her, the scene would end in a melting and she raged against the thought. Melting was all Tritt knew and, except for the children, all Tritt wanted—except for the third and last child. Everything was involved with the children and the still missing child. And when Tritt wanted a melting he got it.

Tritt dominated the triad when he grew stubborn. He would hold on to some simple idea and never let go, and in the end Odeen and Dua would have to give in. Yet now she wouldn't give in—she wouldn't!

She did not feel disloyal at the thought. She never expected to feel for either Odeen or Tritt the

sheer intensity of longing they felt for each other. She could melt alone—they could melt only through her mediation—so why didn't that make her the more regarded? She felt intense pleasure at the three-way melting, of course—she would be stupid to deny it. The pleasure was akin to what she felt when she passed through a rock wall, as she sometimes secretly did. To Tritt and Odeen the pleasure was like nothing else they had ever experienced or could ever experience.

No, wait. Odeen had the pleasure of learning, of what he called intellectual development. Dua felt some of that at times, enough to know what it might mean—and though it was different from melting it might serve as a substitute at least to the point where Odeen could do without—sometimes.

But not so Tritt. For him there was only melting and the children. Only. And when his small mind bent entirely upon that Odeen would give in and then Dua would have to.

Once she had rebelled. "But what happens when we melt? It's hours, days sometimes, before we come out of it. What happens in all that time?"

Tritt had looked outraged at that. "It's always that way. It's got to be."

"I don't like anything that's got to be. I want to know why."

Odeen had looked embarrassed. He spent half his life being embarrassed. He said, "Now, Dua, it does have to be. On account of—"

children." He seemed to pulse as he spoke the word.

"Well, don't pulse," said Dua sharply. "We're grown now and we've melted I don't know how many times and we all know it's so we can have children. You might as well say so. Why does it take so long? That's all."

"Because it's a complicated process," said Odeen, still pulsing. "Because it takes energy. Dua, it takes a long time to get a child started and even when we take a long time a child doesn't always get started. And it's getting worse. Not just with us," he added hastily.

"Worse?" Tritt asked anxiously, but Odeen would say no more.

They had a child eventually, a baby-Rational, a Left-ling, that flitted and thinned so that all three were in raptures and even Odeen would hold it and let it change shape in his hands for as long as Tritt would allow him. For it was Tritt, of course, who had actually incubated it through the long pre-forming. Tritt who had separated from it when it assumed independent existence and Tritt who cared for it at all times.

After that Tritt was often not with them and Dua was oddly pleased. Tritt's obsession annoyed her, but Odeen's—oddly—pleased her. She became increasingly aware of his—importance. There was something to being a Rational that made it possible to answer questions—and somehow Dua had questions for him constantly. He was readier to answer when Tritt was not present.

"Why does it take so long, Odeen? I don't like to melt and then not know what's happening for days at a time."

"We're perfectly safe, Dua," said Odeen earnestly. "Come, nothing has ever happened to us, has it? You've never heard of anything ever happening to any other triad, have you? Besides, you shouldn't ask questions."

"Because I'm an Emotional? Because other Emotionals don't ask questions? I can't stand other Emotionals—if you want to know—and I do want to ask questions."

She was perfectly aware that Odeen was looking at her as though he had never seen anyone as attractive and that if Tritt had been present, melting would have taken place at once. She even let herself thin out—not much, but perceptibly—in deliberate coquettishness.

Odeen said, "But you might not understand the implications, Dua. It takes a great deal of energy to initiate a new spark of life."

"You've often mentioned energy. What is it? Exactly?"

"Why, what we eat."

"Well, then, why don't you say food?"

"Because food and energy aren't quite the same thing. Our food comes from the Sun and that's a kind of energy, but there are other kinds of energy that are not food. When we eat we've got to spread out and absorb the light. It's hardest for Emotionals because they're much more transparent—that is, the light tends to pass through instead of being absorbed—"

How wonderful to have it explained, Dua thought. What she was told she really knew—but she didn't know the proper words, the long science-words that Odeen knew. And they made sharper and more meaningful everything that happened.

OCCASIONALLY now—in adult life when she no longer feared that childish teasing, when she shared in the prestige of being part of the Odeen-triad—she tried to swarm with other Emotionals and to withstand the chatter and the crowding. After all, she did occasionally feel like having a more substantial meal than she usually got and it did make for better melting. There was a joy—sometimes she caught the pleasure the others got out of it—in slithering and maneuvering for exposure to Sunlight, in the luxurious contraction and condensation to absorb the warmth through greater thickness with greater efficiency.

Yet for Dua a little of that went quite a way and the others never seemed to have enough. There was a kind of gluttonous wiggle about them that Dua could not duplicate and that, at length, she could not endure.

That was why Rationals and Parentals were so rarely on the surface. Their thickness made it possible for them to eat quickly and leave. Emotionals writhed in the Sun for hours, for though they ate more slowly they actually needed more energy than the others—at least for melting.

The Emotional supplied the

energy, Odeen had explained (pulsing so that his signals were barely comprehensible), the Rational the seed, the Parental the incubator.

Once Dua understood, a certain amusement began to blend with her disapproval when she watched the other Emotionals virtually slurp up the ruddy Sunlight. Since they never asked questions she was sure they didn't know why they did so and couldn't understand that there was an obscene side to their quivering condensations and to the way they went tittering down below eventually—on their way to a good melt, of course, with lots of energy to spare.

She could also stand Tritt's annoyance when she would come down without that swirling opacity that meant a good gorging. Yet why should Tritt and Odeen complain? The thinness she retained meant a defter melting. Not as sloppy and glutinous as the other triads managed, perhaps, but it was ethereality that counted, she felt sure. And the little-left and little-right came eventually didn't they?

Of course, it was the baby-Emotional, the little-mid, that was the crux. That took more energy than the other two, and Dua never had enough.

Even Odeen was beginning to mention it. "You're not getting enough Sunlight, Dua."

"Yes, I am," said Dua hastily.

"Genia's triad," said Odeen, "has just initiated an Emotional."

Dua did not like Genia. Genia was empty-headed even by

Emotional standards. Dua said loftily, "I suppose she's boasting about it. She has no delicacy. I suppose she's saying, 'I shouldn't mention it, my dear, but you'll never guess what my Left-ling and Right-ling have gone and went and done—'" Dua imitated Genia's tremulous signaling with deadly accuracy and Odeen was amused.

But then he said, "Genia may be a dunder but she has initiated an Emotional, and Tritt is upset about it. We've been at it for much longer than the others have—"

Dua turned away. "I get all the Sun I can stand. I feed till I'm too full to move. I don't know what you want of me."

Odeen said, "Don't be angry. I promised Tritt I would talk to you. He thinks you listen to me—"

"Oh, Tritt just thinks it's odd that you explain science to me. He doesn't understand. Do you want a Mid-ling like the others?"

"No," said Odeen, seriously. "You're not like the others and I'm glad of it. And if you're interested in Rational talk let me explain something. The Sun doesn't supply the food it used to in ancient times. The light-energy is less and requires longer exposures. The birth rate has been dropping for ages and the world's population is only a fraction of what it once was."

"I can't help it," said Dua rebelliously.

"The Hard Ones may be able to. Their numbers have been decreasing, too—"

"Do they pass on?" Dua was suddenly interested. She had

always thought the Hard Ones were immortal—that they weren't born and didn't die. Who had ever seen a baby Hard One, for instance? They didn't have babies. They didn't melt. They didn't eat.

Odeen said thoughtfully, "I imagine they pass on. They never talk about themselves to me. I'm not even sure how they eat, but of course they must. And they have to be born. There's a new one, for instance—I haven't seen him yet— But never mind that. The point is that they've been developing an artificial food—"

"I know," said Dua. "I've tasted it."

"You have? I didn't know that."

"A bunch of the Emotionals talked about it. They said a Hard One was asking for volunteers to taste it and the sillies were all afraid. They said it would probably turn them permanently hard and they would never be able to melt again."

"That's foolish," said Odeen vehemently.

"I know. So I volunteered. That shut them up. They are so difficult to endure, Odeen."

"How was it?"

"Horrible," said Dua firmly. "Harsh and bitter. Of course I didn't tell the other Emotionals that."

Odeen said, "I tasted it. It wasn't that bad."

"Rationals and Parentals don't care what food tastes like."

But Odeen said, "It's still only experimental. They're working hard on improvements, the Hard Ones are. Especially Estwald—"

that's the one I mentioned before, the new one I haven't seen—he's working on it. Losten speaks of him now and then as though he were something special—a great scientist."

"How is it you've never seen him?"

"I'm just a Soft One. You don't suppose they show me and tell me everything, do you? Some day I'll see him, I suppose. He's developed a new source of energy that may yet save us all—"

"I don't want artificial food." said Dua, and left Odeen abruptly.

That conversation had taken place not so long ago and Odeen had not mentioned the new food again. But she knew he would and she brooded about it up here in the Sunset.

She had seen the artificial food that one time—a glowing sphere of light like a tiny Sun in a special cavern set up by the Hard Ones. She could taste its bitterness yet.

Would they improve it? Would they make it taste better? Even delicious? And would she have to eat it then and fill herself with it till the full sensation gave her an uncontrollable desire to melt?

She feared that self-generating desire. It was different when the desire came through the hectic combined stimulation of Left-ling and Right-ling. It was the self-generation that meant she would be ripe to bring about the initiation of a little-mid. And—and she didn't want to start one!

A long time passed before she would admit the truth to herself. She did not want to initiate an

Emotional. It was after all three children were born that the time would inevitably come to pass on, something she did not want to do. She remembered the day her Parental had left her forever and it was never going to be like that for her. Of that she was fiercely determined.

The other Emotionals did not care because they were too empty to think about it, but she was different. She was queer Dua, the Left-Em. That was what they had called her and she *would* be different. As long as she didn't have that third child she would not pass on—she would continue to live.

So she was not going to have that third child. Never. Never!

But how was she going to stave it off? And how would she keep Odeen from finding out? What if Odeen found out?

2b

O DEEN waited for Tritt to do something. He was reasonably sure that Tritt would not actually go up to the surface after Dua. It would mean leaving the children and that was always hard for Tritt to do. Tritt waited without speaking for a while and when he left it was in the direction of the children's alcove.

Odeen was rather glad to see Tritt go. Not quite, of course, for Tritt had been angry and withdrawn so that interpersonal contact had weakened and the barrier of displeasure had arisen. Odeen could not help but be melancholy

at that. It was like the slowing of the life-pulse.

He sometimes wondered if Tritt felt it, too. No, the thought was unfair. Tritt had the special relationship with the children.

As for Dua—who could tell what Dua felt? Who could tell what any Emotional felt? They were so different they made left and right seem alike in everything but mind. But even allowing for the erratic way of Emotionals, who could tell what Dua—especially Dua—felt?

Dua was the problem. The delay in initiating the third child was indeed becoming too long, and Dua was growing less amenable to persuasion, not more. A restlessness was growing in Odeen himself, one he could not quite identify, something he would have to discuss with Losten.

He made his way down to the Hard Caverns, hastening his movements into a continuous flow that was not nearly as undignified as the oddly exciting mixture of wavering and rushing that marked the Emotional curve-along or as amusing as the stolid weight-shift of the Parental—

(He had the keen thought-image of Tritt clumping in pursuit of the baby-Rational who, of course, was almost as slippery at his age as an Emotional and of Dua having to block the baby and bring him back and of Tritt cluckingly undecided whether to shake the small life-object or enfold him with his substance. From the start, Tritt could thin himself more effectively for the babies than for Odeen and when Odeen railed at him about

that Tritt answered gravely, for he had no humor about such things, "Ah, but the children need it more.")

Odeen was selfishly pleased with his own flow and thought it graceful and impressive. He had mentioned that once to Losten, to whom as his Hard-teacher, he confessed everything. Losten had said, "But don't you think Emotionals or Parentals feel the same about their own flow-patterns? If each of you thinks differently and acts differently, ought you not to be pleased differently? A triad doesn't preclude individuality, you know."

Odeen was not sure he understood about individuality. Did that mean being alone? A Hard One was alone, of course. There were no triads among them. How did they stand it?

Odeen had been quite young when the matter had come up and his relationship with the Hard Ones had only been beginning. The thought had suddenly struck him that he wasn't sure there were no triads among them. The fact that none existed was common legend among the Soft Ones—but how correct was the legend? Odeen had thought about that and decided one must ask and not accept matters on faith.

Odeen had asked, "Are you a Left or a Right, sir?" (In later times, Odeen pulsed at the memory of that question. How incredibly naive of him to have asked it. It was very little comfort that every Rational asked the question of a Hard One in some fashion sooner

or later—usually sooner.)

Losten had answered quite calmly, "Neither, Little-left. There are no Lefts or Rights among the Hard Ones."

"Or Mid-l—Emotionals?"

"Or Mid-lings?" And the Hard One changed the shape of his permanent sensory region in a fashion that Odeen eventually associated with amusement or pleasure. "No. No Mid-lings either. Just Hard Ones of one kind."

Odeen had to ask. It came out involuntarily, quite against his desire.

"But how do you stand it?"

"It is different with us, Little-left. We are used to it."

Could Odeen become used to such a concept? There was the Parental triad that had filled his life so far and the sure knowledge that he would at some not-too-distant time form a triad of his own. What was life without that? He thought about it hard now and then. He thought about everything hard, as it came up. Sometimes he managed to catch a glimpse of what it might mean. That Hard Ones had only themselves—not left-brother or right-brother or mid-sister or melting or children or Parentals. They had only the mind, only the inquiry into the Universe.

Perhaps that was enough for them. As Odeen grew older he caught bits of understanding as to the joys of inquiry. They were almost enough—almost enough—and then he would think of Tritt and of Dua and decide that all the

Universe besides was not quite enough.

Unless— It was odd, but every once in a while it seemed to him that there might come a time, a situation, a condition, when— Then he would lose the momentary glimpse—or, rather, glimpse of a glimpse—and miss it all. Yet in time it would return, and lately he thought the concept grew stronger and would remain almost long enough to be caught.

BUT none of that was what should involve him now. He had to see about Dua. He made his way along the familiar route, along which he had first been taken by his Parental (as Tritt would soon take their own young Rational, their own baby-left.)

And he was instantly lost in memory again.

The occasion had been frightening. There had been other young Rationals, all pulsing and shimmering and changing shape despite the Parental signals on every side to stay firm and smooth and not disgrace the triad. One small Left, a playmate of Odeen's, had, in fact, flattened out baby-fashion and would not unflatten, despite all the efforts of his horribly embarrassed Parental. The youngster had since become a perfectly normal student—Though no Odeen, as Odeen himself could not help realizing with considerable complacency.)

They met a number of Hard Ones on that first day of school. They paused with each so that each young-Rational vibration pattern might be recorded in several

specialized ways and for a decision to be reached as to whether to accept any new Rational for instruction immediately or to wait another interval—and if immediately, for what kind of instruction.

Odeen, in a desperate effort, had drawn himself smooth and held himself unwavering as a Hard One approached.

The Hard One said—and the first sound of the odd tones of his voice almost undid Odeen's determination to be grownup— "This is quite a firm-held Rational. How do you represent yourself, Left?"

It was the first time Odeen had ever been called "left" without some form of diminutive. He felt firmer than ever as he managed to say, "Odeen, Hard-Sir," using the polite address his Parental had carefully taught him.

Dimly Odeen remembered being taken through the Hard Caverns, past their equipment, their machinery, their 'libraries, their meaningless, crowding sights and sounds. More than his actual perceptions he remembered his inner feeling of despair. What would they do with him?

His Parental had told him that he would learn, but he did not know what was really meant by "learn" and when he asked his Parental it turned out that the older one did not know either.

It took Odeen a while to find out and the experience was pleasurable, so pleasurable—and yet not without its worrisome aspects.

The Hard One who had first called him "left" was his first teacher. The Hard One taught him

to interpret the wave recordings so that after a while what seemed an incomprehensible code became words—words just as clear as those he could form with his own vibrations.

But then that first mentor failed to appear and another Hard One took over. It was a time before Odeen noticed. It was difficult for him in those early days to tell one Hard One from another, to differentiate among their voices. But then he grew certain. Little by little he grew certain and he trembled at the change. He did not understand its significance.

He gathered courage and finally asked, "Where is my teacher, Hard-Sir?"

"Gamaldan? He will no longer be with you, Left."

Odeen was speechless for a moment. Then he asked, "But Hard Ones don't pass on—" He did not quite finish the phrase.

The new Hard One said nothing, volunteered nothing.

It was always to be like that, Odeen found out. They never talked about themselves. On every other subject they discoursed freely. Concerning themselves—nothing.

From dozens of pieces of evidence Odeen could not help but decide that Hard Ones passed on, that they were not immortal (something so many Soft Ones took for granted). Yet no Hard One ever confirmed his conclusion in words. Odeen and the other student Rationals sometimes discussed it hesitantly, uneasily. Each brought in some small item that pointed inexorably to the mortality of the Hard

Ones and wondered and did not like to conclude the obvious and let it go.

The Hard Ones did not seem to mind that hints of mortality existed. They did nothing to mask them. But they never mentioned them either. And if the question was asked directly (sometimes it inevitably was) they never answered—neither denying nor affirming.

If they passed on they had to be born also—yet they said nothing of that and Odeen never saw a young Hard One.

ODEEN believed the Hard Ones received their energy from rocks instead of from the Sun—at least that they incorporated a powdered black rock into their bodies. Some of the other students thought so, too. Others, rather vehemently, refused to accept the theory. But no one could come to a conclusion, for no one ever saw a Hard One feeding in any manner and the Hard Ones never spoke of that either.

In the end Odeen took their reticence for granted—as part of them. Perhaps, he thought, it was their individuality, the fact that they formed no triads. It built a shell about them.

And then, too, Odeen learned things of such grave import that questions concerning the private lives of the Hard Ones turned to trivia. He learned, for instance, that the whole world was shriveling—dwindling.

Losten, his new teacher, told him that.

Odeen has asked about the un-

occupied caverns that stretched so endlessly into the bowels of the world and Losten had seemed pleased.

“Are you afraid to ask about them, Odeen?”

(He was Odeen now—not merely identified by some reference to his lefthood. It was always a source of pride to him to hear a Hard One address him by name. Many did so. Odeen was a prodigy of understanding and the use of his name seemed a recognition of the fact. More than once Losten had expressed satisfaction at having him as a pupil.)

Odeen was indeed afraid and, after some hesitation, said so. It was always easier to confess shortcomings to the Hard Ones than to fellow Rationals—much easier than to confess them to Tritt, unthinkable to confess them to Tritt.

“Then why do you ask?”

Odeen hesitated again. Then he said slowly, “I’m afraid of the unoccupied caverns because when I was young I was told they had all sorts of monstrous things in them. But I know nothing of that directly—I only know what I have been told by other young ones who couldn’t have known directly either. I want to find out the truth about them and the wanting has grown until there is more curiosity in me than fear.”

Losten looked pleased. “Good. The curiosity is useful, the fear useless. Your inner development is excellent, Odeen, and remember it is only your inner development that counts in the important things. Our help to you is marginal. Since

you want to know it is easy to tell you that the unoccupied caverns are truly unoccupied. They are empty. There is nothing in them but the unimportant things left behind from times past."

"Left behind by whom, Hard-Sir?" Odeen felt uneasily compelled to use the honorific whenever he was too obviously in the presence of knowledge he lacked that the other had.

"By those who occupied them in times past. There was a time thousands of cycles ago when there were many thousands of Hard Ones and millions of Soft Ones. There are fewer of us now than there were in the past, Odeen. Nowadays there are not quite three hundred Hard Ones and fewer than ten thousand Soft Ones."

"Why?" asked Odeen, shocked. (Only three hundred Hard Ones left—surely an open admission that Hard Ones passed on, but this was not the time to think of that.)

"Because energy is diminishing. The Sun is cooling. It becomes harder in every cycle to give birth and to live."

(Well, then, did not the words mean the Hard Ones gave birth, too? And did it mean that the Hard Ones depended on the Sun for food, too, and not on rocks? Odeen filed the thought for later reference and dismissed it for now.)

"Will this continue?" Odeen asked.

"The Sun must dwindle to an end, Odeen, and some day give no food."

"Does that mean that all of us, the Hard Ones and the Soft Ones,

too, ultimately will pass on?"

"What else can it mean?"

"We can't all pass on. If we need energy and the Sun is coming to an end we must find other sources. Other stars."

"But, Odeen, all the stars are coming to an end. The Universe is coming to an end."

"If the stars come to an end, is there no food elsewhere? No other source of energy?"

"No, all the sources of energy in the Universe are coming to an end."

Odeen considered that rebelliously, then said, "Then other Universes. We can't give up just because the Universe does." He was palpitating as he said it. He had expanded with quite unforgivable discourtesy until he had swelled translucently into a size distinctly larger than the Hard One.

But Losten merely expressed extreme pleasure. He said, "Wonderful, my Left-dear. The others must hear of this."

Odeen had collapsed to normal size in mingled embarrassment and pleasure at hearing himself addressed as "Left-dear."

Not very long after that conversation Losten himself had brought them Dua. Odeen had wondered idly if there had been any connection, but after a while his wonder burned itself out. Tritt had repeated so often that it was his own approach to Losten that had brought them Dua that Odeen had given up thinking about it.

But now he was coming to Losten again. A long time had passed since those earlier days when he first learned that the Universe was com-

ing to an end and that (as it turned out) the Hard Ones were resolutely laboring to live on anyway. He had become an adept in many fields and Lostén himself confessed that in physics there was little he could any longer teach Odeen that a Soft One could profitably learn. And there were other young Rationals to take in hand, so he did not see Lostén as frequently as he once did.

ODEEN found Lostén with two half-grown Rationals in the Radiation Chamber. Lostén saw him at once through the glass and came out, closing the door carefully about him.

"My Left-dear," he said, holding out his limbs in a gesture of friendship (so that Odeen, as so often in the past, experienced a perverse desire to touch, but controlled it.) "How are you?"

"I did not mean to interrupt, Lostén-Sir."

"Interrupt? Those two will get along perfectly well by themselves for a time. They are probably glad to see me go, for I am sure I weary them with too much talk."

"Nonsense," said Odeen. "You always fascinated me and I'm sure you fascinate them."

"Well, well. It is good of you to say so. I see you frequently in the library and I hear from others that you do well in your advanced courses—and I miss my best student. How is Tritt? Is he as Parentally stubborn in his ways as ever?"

"More stubborn every day. He gives strength to the triad."

"And Dua?"

"Dua? I have come— She is very unusual, you know."

Lostén nodded, "Yes, I know that." His expression was one that Odeen had grown to associate with melancholy.

Odeen waited a moment, then decided to tackle the matter directly. He asked, "Lostén-Sir, was she brought to us, to Tritt and myself, just because she was unusual?"

Lostén said, "Would you be surprised? You are quite unusual yourself, Odeen, and you have told me on a number of occasions that Tritt is."

"Yes," said Odeen with conviction. "He is."

"Then ought not your triad include an unusual Emotional?"

"There are many ways of being unusual," said Odeen thoughtfully. "In some ways Dua's oddness displeases Tritt and worries me. May I consult you?"

"Always."

"She is not fond of—of melting."

Lostén listened gravely, to all appearances unembarrassed.

Odeen went on: "She is fond of melting when we melt, that is, but it is not always easy to persuade her to do so."

Lostén said, "How does Tritt feel about melting? I mean, aside from the immediate pleasure of the act? What does it mean to him besides pleasure?"

"Children, of course," said Odeen. "I like them and Dua likes them, too, but Tritt is the Parental. Do you understand that?" (It suddenly seemed to Odeen that Lostén could not possibly understand all the subtleties of the triad.)

"I try to understand," said Losten. "It seems to me, then, that Tritt gets more out of melting than melting alone. And how about you? What do you get out of it besides the pleasure?"

Odeen considered. "I think you know. A kind of mental stimulation."

"Yes, I know—but I want to make sure you know. I want to make sure you haven't forgotten. You have told me often that when you came out of a period of melting and its odd loss of time—during which I admit I sometimes didn't see you for rather long periods—you suddenly found yourself understanding many things that had seemed obscure before."

"It was as though my mind remained active in the interval," said Odeen. "It was as though the time spent—even though I was unaware of its passing and unconscious of my existence—were necessary to me. During melting I could apparently think more deeply and intensely—without the distraction of the less intellectual side of life."

"Yes," agreed Losten, "and you'd come back with a quantum-jump in understanding. It is a common thing among you Rationals, though I must admit no one improved in such great leaps as you. I honestly think that no Rational in history has done so."

"Really?" Odeen tried not to seem unduly elated.

"On the other hand, I may be wrong." Losten seemed slightly amused at Odeen's sudden loss of shimmer. "But never mind that. The point is that you, like Tritt, get

something out of the melt beside the melt itself."

"Yes. Most certainly."

"And what does Dua get out of the melt besides the melt?"

There was a long pause.

"I don't know," said Odeen.

"Have you never asked her?"

"Never."

"But then," said Losten, "if all she gets out of a melt is the melt and if you and Tritt get out of it the melt plus something else—why should she be as eager for it as you two are?"

"Other Emotionals don't seem to require—" began Odeen defensively.

"Other Emotionals are not like Dua. You've told me that often enough and, I think, with satisfaction."

O DEEN felt ashamed. "I had thought it might be something else."

"What might that be?"

"It's hard to explain. We know each other in the triad—we sense each other. In some ways all three of us are part of a single individual. A misty individual that comes and goes. Mostly the feeling is subconscious. If we think about it with too great a concentration we lose it, so we can never get real detail. We—" Odeen stopped rather hopelessly. "It's hard to explain the triad to someone—"

"I am trying to understand. You think you have caught a portion of Dua's inner mind, something she has tried to keep secret—is that it?"

"I'm not sure. It is the vaguest impression, sensed with a corner of

my mind just now and then."

"Well?"

"I sometimes think Dua doesn't want to start a baby-Emotional."

Losten looked at him gravely. "You only have two children so far, I think. A little-left and a little-right."

"Yes, only two. The Emotional is difficult to initiate, you know."

"I know."

"And Dua will not trouble to absorb the necessary energy. Or even try to. She has any number of reasons but I can't believe any of them. It seems to me that for some reason she just doesn't want an Emotional. For myself—if Dua really didn't want one for a while—well, I would let her have her way. But Tritt is a Parental and he wants one. He must have one and somehow I can't disappoint Tritt, not even for Dua."

"If Dua had some rational cause for not wanting to initiate an Emotional, would that make a difference with you?"

"With me, certainly, but not with Tritt. He doesn't understand such things."

"But would you labor to keep him patient?"

"Yes, I would—for as long as I could."

Losten said, "Has it occurred to you that hardly any Soft Ones—" he hesitated as though searching for a word and then used the customary Soft-One phrase—"ever pass on before the children are born—all three, with the baby-Emotional last?"

"Yes, I know." Odeen wondered how Losten could possibly think

him ignorant of so elementary a bit of knowledge.

"Then the birth of a baby-Emotional is equivalent to the coming of time to pass on."

"Usually not till the Emotional is old enough—"

"But the time for passing on will be coming. Might it not be that Dua does not want to pass on?"

"How can that be, Losten?" When the time comes to pass on, it is as when the time comes to melt. How can you not want to?" (Hard Ones did not melt—perhaps they did not understand.)

"Suppose Dua simply wants never to pass on? What would you then say?"

"Why, that we must pass on eventually. If Dua merely wants to delay the last baby I might humor her and even persuade Tritt to—perhaps. If she wants never to have it—that simply cannot be allowed."

"Why so?"

Odeen paused to think it out. "I can't say, Losten-Sir, but I know we must pass on. I know it more and feel it more with each cycle, and sometimes I almost think I understand why."

"You are a philosopher I sometimes think, Odeen," said Losten dryly. "Let's consider. By the time the third baby comes and grows, Tritt will have had all his children and can look forward to passing on after a fulfilled life. You yourself will have had the satisfaction of much learning and you, too, can pass on after a fulfilled life. But Dua?"

"I don't know," said Odeen wretchedly. "Other Emotionals

cling together and seem to get some pleasure out of chattering with each other. Dua, however, will not do so."

"Well, she is unusual. Is there nothing she likes?"

"She likes to listen to me talk about my work," mumbled Odeen.

Losten said, "Well, don't be ashamed of that, Odeen. Every Rational talks about his work to his right and his mid. You all pretend you don't but you all do."

Odeen said, "But Dua listens, Losten-Sir."

"I'm quite sure she does. Not like other Emotionals. And does it ever seem to you that she understands rather better after a melt?"

"Yes, I have noticed that at times. I didn't pay any particular attention, though—"

"Because you are sure Emotionals can't really understand these things. But there seems to be much of the Rational in Dua."

(Odeen looked up at Losten with sudden consternation. Once Dua had told him of her childhood unhappiness—only once—of the shrill calls of the other Emotionals and of the filthy name they had called her—Left-Em. Had Losten heard of that, somehow? But he was merely looking calmly at Odeen.)

Odeen said, "I have sometimes thought that, too." Then he burst out with: "I am proud of her for that."

"Nothing wrong with that," said Losten. "Why not tell her so? And if she likes to pamper the Rationalness in herself—why not let her? Teach her what you know more intensively. Answer her questions.

Will it disgrace your triad to do that?"

"I don't care if it does. And why should it? Tritt will think it a waste of time, but I'll handle him."

"Explain to him that if Dua gets more out of life and a truer sense of fulfillment she might not have the fear of passing on that she now has and might be more ready to have a baby-Emotional."

It was as though an enormous feeling of impending disaster had been lifted from Odeen. He said hurriedly, "You're right. I feel you're right. Losten-Sir, you understand so much. With you leading the Hard Ones, how can we fail to continue succeeding in the other-Universe project?"

"With me?" Losten was amused. "You forget it is Estwald who is guiding us now. He is the real hero of the project. It would be nowhere without him."

"Oh, yes," said Odeen, momentarily discomfited. He had never yet seen Estwald. In fact, he had not yet met a Soft One who had actually met him, though some reported having seen him in the distance now and then. Estwald was a new Hard One—new, at least, in the sense that when Odeen had been young he had never heard Estwald mentioned. Did that mean that Estwald was a young Hard One, had been a child Hard One when Odeen had been a child Soft One?

But never mind that. Right now, Odeen wanted to get back home. He could not touch Losten in gratitude, but he could thank him again and then hasten away joyfully.

His joy had a selfish component. It was not put there merely by the distant prospect of the baby-Emotional and the thought of Tritt's pleasure. It was not even caused by the thought of Dua's fulfillment. What counted with him at this very moment was the immediate gleeful prospect ahead. He was going to be able to teach. No other Rational could feel the pleasure of so doing, he was sure, for no other Rational could possibly have an Emotional like Dua as part of the triad.

It would be wonderful, if only Tritt could be made to understand the necessity. He would have to talk to Tritt, somehow persuade him to be patient.

2c

TRITT had never felt less patient. He did not pretend to understand why Dua acted as she did. He did not want to try. He did not care. He never knew why Emotionals did what they did. And Dua did not even act like the other Emotionals.

She never thought about the important thing. She would look at the Sun. But then she would thin out so that the light and food would simply pass through her. Then she would say it was beautiful. That was not the important thing. The important thing was to eat. What was beautiful about eating? What was beautiful?

She always wanted to melt differently. Once she said, "Let's talk first. We never talk about it. We never think about it."

Odeen would always say, "Let her have her way, Tritt. It makes the melting better."

Odeen was always patient. He always thought things would be better after a wait. Or else he would want to think matters out.

Tritt was not sure he knew what Odeen meant by "thinking out." It seemed to him it just meant that Odeen did nothing.

Like getting Dua in the first place. Odeen would still be thinking it out. Tritt had gone right up to a Hard One and asked. That was the way to act.

Now Odeen would do nothing about Dua. What about the baby-Emotional? Well, Tritt would do something about it, if Odeen didn't.

In fact, he was doing something. He was edging down the long corridor even as all this was going through his mind. He was hardly aware he had come this far. Was this "thinking out?" Well—he would not let himself be frightened. He would not back away.

He looked about him stolidly. This was the way to the Hard Caverns. He knew he would be going that way with his little-left before very long. He had been shown the way by Odeen once.

He did not know what he would do when he got there this time. Still, he felt no fright at all. He wanted a baby-Emotional. It was his right to have a baby-Emotional. Nothing was more important than that. The Hard Ones would see he got one. Had they not brought Dua when he had asked?

But whom would he ask? Could he speak to any Hard One? Dimly

he had made up his mind not to ask just any Hard One. There was the name of one he would ask for.

He remembered the name. He even remembered when he had first heard the name. It was the time when the little-left had grown old enough to begin changing shape voluntarily. (What a great day! "Come, Odeen, quickly! Annis is all oval and hard. All by himself, too. Dua, look!") And they had rushed in. Annis had been the only child then. They had had to wait so long for the second. So they rushed in and he was just plastered in the corner. He was curling at himself and flowing over his resting place like wet clay. Odeen had left because he was busy. But Dua had said, "Oh, he'll do it again, Tritt." They had watched for hours and he didn't.)

Tritt was hurt that Odeen hadn't waited. He would have scolded but Odeen had looked so weary. There had been definite wrinkles in his ovoid. And he had made no effort to smooth them out.

Tritt had asked anxiously, "Is anything wrong, Odeen?"

"A hard day and I'm not sure I'm going to get differential equations before the next melting." (Tritt did not remember the exact hard words. Odeen always used hard words.)

"Do you want to melt now?"

"Oh, no. I just saw Dua heading topside and you know how she is if we try to interrupt that. There's no rush, really. There's a new Hard One, too."

"A new Hard One?" Tritt had known a distinct lack of interest.

Odeen found sharp interest in associating with Hard Ones, but Tritt wished the interest did not exist. Odeen was more intent on what he called his education than any other Rational in the area. That was unfair. Odeen was too wrapped up in that. Dua was too wrapped up in roaming the surface alone. No one was properly interested in the triad but Tritt.

"He's called Estwald."

"Estwald?" Tritt had begun to feel a twinge of interest, perhaps because he was anxiously sensing Odeen's feelings.

"I've never seen him, but they all talk about him." Odeen's eyes had flattened out as they usually did when he turned introspective. "He's responsible for that new thing they've got."

"What new thing?"

"The positron Pu— You wouldn't understand, Tritt. It's a new thing they have. It's going to revolutionize the whole world."

"What's revolutionize?"

"Make everything different."

Tritt had been at once alarmed. "They mustn't make everything different."

"They'll make everything better. Different isn't always worse. Anyway, Estwald is responsible. He's very bright, I get the feeling."

"Then why don't you like him?"

"I didn't say I didn't like him."

"You feel as though you don't like him."

"Oh, nothing of the sort, Tritt. It's just that somehow—somehow—" Odeen had laughed. "I'm jealous. Hard Ones are so intelligent that a Soft One is nothing in

comparison—but I got used to that because Losten was always telling me how bright I was—for a Soft One, I suppose. But now this Estwald comes along and even Losten seems lost in admiration. And I'm really nothing." Tritt had bellied out his foreplane until it had made contact with Odeen, who had looked up and smiled. "But that's just stupidity on my part. Who cares how smart a Hard One is? Not one of them has a Tritt."

Then they both had gone looking for Dua, after all. For a wonder she had finished wandering about—they had met her as she was heading down again. It had been a very good melting, though the time-lapse had been only a day or so. Tritt had worried about meltings then. With Annis so small even a short absence had been risky, though there were always other Parentals who would take over if necessary.

After that Odeen had mentioned Estwald now and then. He always called him "the New One" even after considerable time had passed. He still had never seen him. "I think I'm avoiding him," he had said once when Dua was with them, "because he knows so much about the new device. I don't want to find out too soon. It's too much fun to learn."

"The Positron Pump?" Dua had asked.

That was another funny thing about Dua, Tritt thought. It annoyed him. She could say the hard words almost as well as Odeen could. Strange behavior for an Emotional!

SO TRITT made up his mind to ask Estwald because Odeen had said he was smart. Besides, Odeen had never seen him. Estwald could not say, "I've talked to Odeen about it, Tritt, and you mustn't worry."

Everyone thought that if you talked to the Rational you were talking to the triad. Nobody paid attention to the Parentals. But they would have to this time.

He was in the Hard Caverns and everything seemed different. Nothing here looked like anything Tritt could understand. It was all wrong and frightening. Still, he was too anxious to see Estwald to let himself really be frightened. He said to himself, "I want my little-mid." That made him feel firm enough to walk forward.

He saw a Hard One finally. There was just this one, doing something, bending over something. Odeen had once told Tritt that Hard Ones were always working at their—whatever-it-was. Tritt did not remember and did not care.

He moved smoothly up and stopped. "Hard-Sir," he said.

The Hard One looked up at him and the air vibrated about him, the way Odeen said it did when two Hard Ones talked to each other sometimes. Then the Hard One seemed really to see Tritt and said, "Why, it's a Right. What is your business here? Do you have your little-left with you? Is today the start of a-semester?"

Tritt ignored it all. He said, "Where can I find Estwald, Hard-Sir?"

"Find whom?"

"Estwald."

The Hard One was silent for a long moment. Then he said, "What is your business with Estwald, Right?"

Tritt felt stubborn. "It is important I speak to him. Are you Estwald, Hard-Sir?"

"No, I am not. What is your name, Right?"

"Tritt, Hard-Sir."

"I see. You're the Right of Odeen's triad, aren't you?"

"Yes."

The Hard One's voice seemed to soften. "I'm afraid you can't see Estwald at the moment. He's not here. If anyone else can help you—"

Tritt didn't know what to say. He simply stood there.

The Hard One said, "You go home now. Talk to Odeen. He'll help you. Yes? Go home, Right."

The Hard One turned away. He seemed very concerned in matters other than Tritt and Tritt still stood there, uncertain. Then he moved into another section quietly, flowing noiselessly. The Hard One did not look up.

Tritt was not certain why he had moved in that particular direction. At first he felt only that it was good to do so. Then the reason became clear. There was a thin warmth of food about him and he was nibbling at it.

He had not been conscious of hunger, yet now he was eating and enjoying.

The Sun was nowhere. Instinctively he looked up, but of course he was in a cavern. Yet the food was better than he had ever found

it to be on the surface. He looked about, wondering. He wondered most of all that he should be wondering.

He had sometimes been impatient with Odeen because Odeen wondered about so many things that did not matter. Now he himself—Tritt—was wondering. But what he was wondering about did matter. Suddenly, with an almost blinding flash, he realized that he would not wonder unless something in him told him the subject did matter.

He acted quickly, marveling at his own bravery. After a while he retraced his steps. He moved past the Hard One again, the one to whom he had earlier spoken. He said, "I am going home, Hard-Sir."

The Hard One merely said something incoherent. He was still doing something, bending over something, doing silly things and not seeing the important thing.

If Hard Ones were so great and powerful and smart, Tritt thought, how could they be so stupid?

3a

DUA found herself drifting toward the Hard Caverns. Partly she wanted something to do now that the Sun had set, something to keep her from returning home for an additional period of time, something to delay her having to listen to the importunities of Tritt and the half-embarrassed, half-resigned suggestions of Odeen. Partly, too, the Hard Caverns held an attraction for her.

She had felt the last for a long

time, ever since she was little in fact and had given up trying to pretend it wasn't so. Emotionals were not supposed to feel such temptations. Sometimes little Emotionals did—Dua was old enough and experienced enough to know that—but such young whims quickly faded or were discouraged.

She herself, though, had continued stubbornly curious about the world and the Sun and the caverns—anything at all—till her Parental had said, "You're a queer one, Dua, dear. You're a funny little-midling. What will become of you?"

She hadn't the vaguest notion at first of what was so queer and so funny about wanting to know. She had found out quickly enough that her Parental could not answer her questions. Once she had tried her Left-father, but he had shown none of her Parental's soft puzzlement. He had snapped, "Why do you ask, Dua?" his look harshly inquiring.

She had run away frightened, and had not asked him again.

One day another Emotional of her own age had shrieked "Left-Em" at her after she had said—she no longer remembered what—something that had seemed natural to her at the time. Dua had been abashed without knowing why and had asked her considerably older Left-brother, what a Left-Em was. He had withdrawn, embarrassed and mumbling, "I don't know—" when it was obvious he did.

After some thought she had gone to her Parental and asked, "Am I a Left-Em, daddy?"

And he had said, "Who called you that, Dua? You must not repeat such words."

She flowed herself about his near corner, thought about it a while and asked, "Is it bad?"

He said, "You'll grow out of it—" and let himself bulge a bit to make her swing outward and vibrate in the game she had always loved. She did not love it now, for it was quite clear that he hadn't answered her, really. She moved away thoughtfully. He had said, you'll grow *out* of it, so she was *in* it now, but in *what*?

Even then, she had had few real friends among the other Emotionals. They liked to whisper and giggle together, but she preferred flowing over the crumbled rocks, and enjoying the sensation of their roughness. Some mids, however, were more friendly than others and less provoking. There was Doral, as silly as the rest, really, but who would sometimes chatter amusingly. (Doral had grown up to join a triad with Dua's Right-brother and a young Left from another cavern complex, a Left whom Dua did not particularly like. Doral had then gone on to initiate a baby-left and baby-right in rapid succession and a baby-mid not too long after that. She had also grown so dense that the triad looked as though it had two Parentals and Dua wondered if they could still melt. Tritt was always telling her pointedly what a good triad Doral helped make up.)

She and Doral had sat alone one day and Dua had whispered, "Doral, do you know what a Left-Em is?"

Doral had tittered and compressed herself, as though to avoid being seen. She had said, "It's an Emotional that acts like a Rational—you know, like a Left. Get it? Left-Emotional—Left-Em. Get it?"

Of course Dua understood. It was obvious once explained. She would have seen it for herself at once if she had been able to bring herself to imagine such a state of affairs.

Dua asked, "How do you know?"

"The older girls told me."

Doral's substance swirled and Dua found the motion unpleasant. "It's dirty," Doral said.

"Why?" asked Dua.

"Because it's dirty. Emotionals shouldn't act like Rationals."

Dua had never thought about the possibility, but now she did. She said, "Why shouldn't they?"

"Because. You want to know something else that's dirty?"

Dua couldn't help being intrigued. "What?"

Doral didn't say anything, but a portion of herself expanded suddenly and brushed against the unsuspecting Dua before the latter could form a concavity to elude the touch. Dua didn't like it.

She shrank away and said, "Don't do that."

"You know what else is dirty? You can go into a rock."

"No, you can't," said Dua. It had been a silly thing to say for Dua had often moved through the outer surface of the rock and liked it. But now in the context of Doral's snickering she felt revolted and denied the whole thing even to herself.

"Yes, you can. It's called rock-

rubbing. Emotionals can do it easy. Lefts and Rights can only do it as babies. When they grow up, they do it with each other."

"I don't believe you. You're making it up."

"They do, I tell you. Do you know Dimit?"

"No."

"Sure you do. She's the one with the thick corner from Cavern C."

"Is she the one who flows funny?"

"Yes. On account of the thick corner. That's the one. She got into a rock all the way once—except for the thick corner. She let her Left-brother watch her do it and he told their Parental and what she got for *that!* She never did it again."

Dua left then, quite upset. She didn't talk to Doral again for a long time and never really grew friendly with Doral again. Yet her curiosity had been aroused.

Her curiosity? Why not say her Left-Emishness?

ONE day when she was quite sure her Parental was not in the vicinity she let herself melt into a rock, slowly. It had been the first time she had tried it since she was quite young. There was a warmness about the sensation, but when she emerged she felt as though everyone could tell, as though the rock had left a stain on her.

She tried it again now and then, more boldly, and let herself enjoy it more. She never sank in really deeply, of course.

Eventually she was caught by her Parental who clucked in displeasure and she was more careful after that. She was older now and knew for

certain fact that, despite Doral's snickering, the practice was not uncommon. Practically every Emotional indulged in it now and then and some quite openly admitted the fact.

Such practices happened less frequently as Emotionals grew older and Dua did not think that any Emotional she knew ever indulged after joining a triad and beginning the proper meltings. It was one of her secrets (she never told anybody) that she had kept it up and that once or twice she had tried it even after triad-formation. (Those few times she had thought: *What if Tritt finds out?* Somehow the prospect seemed to present formidable consequences and rather spoiled the fun.)

She found excuses for herself in her ordeals with the others. The cry of "Left-Em" drove her into an almost hermitlike isolation at one point and, being alone, she found consolation in the rocks. Rock-rubbing, whether it was dirty or not, was a solitary act and they were forcing her to be solitary.

Or so she told herself.

She had tried to strike back once. She had cried out, "You're a bunch of Right-Em's, a bunch of dirty Right-Em's," at the taunting mids.

They had only laughed and Dua had run away in confusion and frustration. But she had been right. Almost every Emotional, when she reached the age of triad-formation, became interested in babies, fluttering about them in Parental imitation. Dua had found repulsive. She herself had never felt such interest. Babies were only babies—

they were for right-brothers to worry about.

The name-calling died as Dua grew older. It helped that she retained a girlishly rarefied structure and could flow with a smoky curl no others could duplicate. And when, increasingly, Lefts and Rights showed interest in her, the other Emotionals found it difficult to sneer.

And yet—and yet—now that no one ever dared speak disrespectfully to Dua (for it was well known through all the caverns that Odeen was the most prominent Rational of the generation and Dua was his Mid-ling), she herself knew that she was a Left-Em past all redemption.

She did not think that being one was dirty—not really—but occasionally she caught herself wishing she were a Rational and then she was abashed. She wondered if—partly—she didn't want a baby-Emotional because she was not a real Emotional herself and did not fill her triad role properly.

Odeen had not minded her being a Left-Em. He never called her one—but he liked her interest in his life, liked her questions and the way she could understand. He even defended her when Tritt grew jealous—well, not jealous, really—but overwhelmed with a feeling that the situation did not fit his stubborn and limited outlook.

ODEEN had taken her to the Hard Caverns occasionally, eager to posture before Dua and openly pleased that Dua was impressed. And she was impressed,

not so much with the clear fact of his knowledge and intelligence, but with the fact that he did not resent sharing it. (She remembered her left-father's harsh response that one time she had questioned him.) She never loved Odeen as much as when he let her share his life—yet even that was part of her Left-Emishness.

Perhaps (this had occurred to her over and over) by being Left-Emish, she moved closer to Odeen and farther from Tritt and this was another reason Tritt's importunities repelled her.

Her first time in a Hard Cavern she heard two Hard Ones talking. She did not know they were talking, of course. There was air vibration, rapid and changing, that made an unpleasant buzz deep inside her. She had to rarefy and let it through.

Odeen said, "They're talking." Then, hastily, anticipating her objection: "Their kind of talk. They understand each other."

Dua managed to grasp the concept. It was all the more delightful to understand quickly because that pleased Odeen so. (He once said, "None of the other Rationals I've ever met have anything but an empty-head for an Emotional. I'm lucky." She had said, "But the other Rationals seem to like empty-heads. Why are you different from them, Odeen?" Odeen did not deny that the other Rationals liked empty-heads. He simply said, "I've never figured it out and I don't think it's important that I do. I'm pleased with you and I'm pleased that I'm pleased.")

She said, "Can you understand Hard-One talk?"

"Not really," said Odeen. "I can't sense the changes fast enough. Sometimes I can get a feel for what they're saying, even without understanding, especially after we've melted. Just sometimes, though. Getting feels like that is really an Emotional trick, except even if an Emotional does it, she can never make real sense out of what she's feeling. *You* might, though."

Dua demurred. "I'd be afraid to. They might not like it."

"Oh, go on. I'm curious. See if you can tell what they're talking about."

"Shall I? Really?"

"Go ahead. If they catch you and are annoyed, I'll say I made you do it."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Feeling rather fluttery, Dua let herself reach out to the Hard Ones and adopted the total passivity that allowed the influx of feelings.

She said, "Excitement. They're excited. Someone new."

Odeen said, "Maybe that's Estwald."

It was the first time Dua had heard the name. She said, "That's funny."

"What's funny?"

"I have the feeling of a big Sun. A really big Sun."

Odeen looked thoughtful. "They might be talking about that."

"But how can that be?"

JUST then the Hard Ones spied them, approached and greeted

them in Soft-One fashion of speech. Dua was horribly embarrassed and wondered if they knew she had been sensing them. If they did, though, they said nothing.

(Odeen told her afterward that it was quite rare to come upon Hard Ones talking among themselves in their own fashion. They always deferred to the Soft Ones and seemed always to suspend their own talk when Soft Ones were there. "They like us so much," said Odeen. "They are very kind.")

Once in a while he would take her deep into the Hard Caverns—usually when Tritt was entirely wrapped up in the children. Odeen did not go out of his way to tell Tritt that he had taken Dua down—to do so would have been sure to evoke some response to the effect that Odeen's coddling simply encouraged Dua's reluctance to Sun herself and just made the melting that much more ineffective. It was hard to talk to Tritt for more than five minutes without melting coming into the conversation.

She had even gone down alone once or twice. Doing so had always frightened her a little, though the Hard Ones she met were always friendly, always "very kind" as Odeen said. But they did not seem to take her seriously. They were pleased, but somehow amused—she could feel that definitely—when she asked questions. And when they answered it was in some simple way that carried no information. "Just a machine, Dua," they would say. "Odeen might be able to tell you."

She wondered if she had met

Estwald. She never quite dared to try to discover the names of the Hard Ones she met (except Losten's, to whom Odeen had introduced her and of whom she heard a great deal.) Sometimes it seemed to her that this Hard One or that might be Estwald. Odeen talked about him with great awe and with some resentment.

She gathered that Estwald was too deeply engaged in work of the profoundest importance to be in the caverns readily accessible to the Soft Ones.

She pieced together what Odeen told her and, little by little, discovered that the world needed food badly. Odeen hardly ever called it "food." He said "energy" instead and said it was the Hard-One word for it.

The Sun was fading and dying but Estwald had discovered how to find energy far away, far beyond the Sun, far beyond the seven stars that shone in the dark night sky. (Odeen said the seven stars were seven Suns that were very distant and that there were many other stars that were even more distant and were too dim to be seen. Tritt had heard him say that and had asked what use it was for stars to exist if they could not be seen and had said he didn't believe a word of what Odeen was saying.)

It looked now as though there would be plenty of energy forever—at least as soon as Estwald and the other Hard Ones learned to make the new energy taste right.

Only a few days ago she had asked Odeen, "Do you remember, long ago, when you took me to the

Hard Caverns and I sensed the Hard Ones and said I caught the feeling of a big Sun?"

Odeen had looked puzzled for a moment. "I'm not sure. But go ahead, Dua. What about it?"

"I've been thinking. Is the big Sun the source of the new energy?"

Odeen had said happily, "That's good, Dua. It's not quite right, but that's such good intuition for an Emotional."

DUA had been moving slowly, rather moodily, during her reveries. Without particularly noting the passage of either time or space she found herself in the Hard Caverns and was just beginning to wonder if she had not really delayed as long as she safely could and whether she had not best turn home and face the inevitable annoyance of Tritt when—almost as though the thought of Tritt had brought it about—she sensed Tritt.

The sensation was so strong that she knew only one confused moment of thinking that somehow she was picking up his feelings far away in the home cavern. No—he was here, down here in the Hard Caverns with her.

But what could he be doing here? Was he pursuing her? Was he going to quarrel with her here? Was he foolishly going to appeal to the Hard Ones? Dua did not think she could endure that.

And then the feeling of cold horror left her and was replaced by astonishment. Tritt was not thinking of her at all. He had to be unaware of her presence. All she could sense about him was an over-

whelming feeling of some sort of determination, mixed with fear and apprehension at something he would do.

Dua might have penetrated farther and found out something, at least, about why he was here—but nothing was further from her thoughts. Since Tritt did not know she was in the vicinity she wanted to make sure of only one thing—that he continued not to know.

She did, then almost in pure reflex, something that a moment before she would not have dreamed of doing under any circumstances.

Perhaps it was (she later thought) because of her idle reminiscences of that little-girl talk with Doral or because of her memories of her own experiments with rock-rubbing. (There was a complicated adult word for it but she found that word infinitely more embarrassing than the one all the children had used.)

In any case, without quite knowing what she was doing or, for a short while afterward, what she had done, she simply flowed hastily into the nearest wall.

Into it! Every bit of her!

The horror of what she had done was mitigated by the perfect manner in which it accomplished its purpose. Tritt passed by within touching distance and remained completely unaware that at one point he might have reached out and felt his Mid-ling.

By that time Dua had no room to wonder what Tritt might be doing in the Hard Caverns if he had not come in pursuit of her.

She forgot Tritt completely.

What filled her instead was pure astonishment at her position. Even in childhood she had never melted completely into rock or met anyone who admitted doing so (though there were invariably tales of someone else who had). Certainly no adult Emotional ever had or could have acted as Dua had. She was unusually rarefied even for an Emotional (Odeen was fond of telling her that) and her avoidance of food accentuated this (as Tritt often said).

What she had just done indicated the extent of her rarefaction more than any amount of Right-ling scolding could have managed and for a moment she was ashamed and sorry for Tritt.

AND then she was swept by a deeper shame. What if she were caught? What if a Hard One passed and lingered? She could not possibly bring herself to emerge if anyone were watching—but how long could she stay in the rock?

She sensed the Hard Ones and realized they were far away. She paused, strove to calm herself. The rock, permeating and surrounding her, lent a grayness to her perceptions but did not dim them. Indeed, she sensed more sharply. She could still feel Tritt's steady motion downward as keenly as though he were by her side and she was aware of the Hard Ones, though they were in a cavern complex far away. She saw the Hard Ones, every single one of them, each in his place, and caught their vibratory speech to the fullest de-

tail. She even absorbed bits of what they were saying.

She was sensing as never before.

So, though she could now leave the rock, secure in the knowledge she was both alone and unobserved, she did not—partly out of amazement, partly because of the curious exultation she felt at a new understanding. She desired to experience it further.

Her sensitivity was such that she even knew why she was sensitive. Odeen had frequently remarked how well he understood something after a period of melting, even though he had not understood it at all before. Something about the melted state increased sensitivity incredibly—more was absorbed, more used. The reason was the greater atomic density during melting, Odeen had said.

Even though Dua was not sure what "greater atomic density" meant, it came with melting and wasn't this present situation rather like melting? Hadn't Dua melted with rock?

When the triad melted, all the sensitivity went to Odeen's benefit. The Rational absorbed it, gained understanding and retained that understanding after separation. But now Dua was the only consciousness in the melt, which consisted of herself and the rock. There was "greater atomic density" (surely?) with only herself to benefit.

(Was this why rock-rubbing was considered a perversion? Was this why Emotionals were warned off? Or was her experience unique because she was so rarefied? Or be-

cause she was a Left-Em?)

And then Dua stopped all speculation and simply sensed—in fascination. She was only mechanically aware of Tritt returning, moving past her, passing in the direction from which he had come. She was only mechanically aware—scarcely feeling the vaguest surprise—that Odeen, too, was coming up from the Hard Caverns. She concentrated on the Hard Ones, trying to make the most of her perceptions.

It was a long time before she flowed out of the rock. And when that time came she was not concerned overmuch about whether she would be observed. She was confident enough of her sensing ability to know she would not be.

She went home deep in thought.

3b

O DEEN had returned to find Tritt waiting for him. Dua still had not come back. Tritt did not seem disturbed at that, though he was upset about something else. His emotions were strong enough for Odeen to sense them clearly, but he let them be without probing. Dua's absence made him restless. He found himself annoyed at Tritt's presence simply because Tritt was not Dua.

In this he surprised himself. He could not deny to himself that it was Tritt who, of the two, was the dearer to him. Ideally all members of the triad were one and each member should treat the other two exactly on a par. Just the same,

Odeen had never known a triad in which this was so. One of the three was always a bit on the outside and generally knew it, too.

It was rarely the Emotional, though. Emotionals supported each other cross-triad to an extent that Rationals and Parentals never did. The Rational had his teacher, the saying went, and the Parental his children—but the Emotional had all the other Emotionals.

Emotionals compared notes and if one claimed neglect or could be made to claim it she was sent back with a thin patter of instructions to stand firm, to demand! And because melting depended so much on the Emotional and her attitude she was usually pampered by both left and right.

But Dua was so non-Emotional an Emotional. She did not seem to care that Odeen and Tritt were so close and she had no close friendships among the Emotionals to make her care.

Odeen loved having her so interested in his work, loved having her so concerned and so amazingly ready of comprehension—but that was an intellectual love. The deeper feeling went to steady, stupid Tritt who knew his place so well and who could offer so little other than exactly what counted—the security of assured routine.

But now Odeen felt petulant. He asked, "Have you heard from Dua, Tritt?"

Tritt did not answer directly. He said, "I am busy. I will see you later. I have been doing things."

"Where are the children? Have you been gone, too? There is a

definite been-gone feel to you.”

A note of annoyance made itself plain in Tritt's voice. “The children are well trained. They know enough to place themselves in community care. Really, Odeen, they are not babies.” But he did not deny the “been-gone” aura that he faintly exuded.

“I'm sorry. I'm just anxious to see Dua.”

“You should feel so more often,” Tritt said. “You always tell me to leave her alone. You look for her.” And he went on into the deeper recesses of the home cavern.

Odeen looked after his Rightling with some surprise. On almost any other occasion he would have followed in an attempt to probe the unusual uneasiness that was making itself quite evident through the ingrained stolidity of a Parental. What had Tritt done?

But Odeen was waiting for Dua and growing more anxious by the moment. He let Tritt go.

Anxiety keened Odeen's sensitivity. Rationals knew a perverse pride in their relative poverty of perception. Such perception was not a thing of the mind—it was most characteristic of Emotionals. Odeen was a Rational of Rationals, proud of reasoning rather than feeling, yet now he flung out the imperfect net of his emotional perception as far as he could and wished, for just a moment, that he were an Emotional and could send it out farther and better.

Yet it eventually served his purpose. He could detect Dua's approach finally at an unusual distance—for him—and hastened out

to meet her. And because he made her out at such a distance, he was more aware of her rarefaction than he ordinarily was. She was a delicate mist, no more.

Tritt was right, Odeen thought with sudden, sharp concern. Dua must be made to eat and to melt. Her interest in life must be increased.

HE WAS so intent on the necessity of this that when she flung herself flowingly toward him and virtually engulfed him—in utter disregard of the fact that they were not in private and might be observed—and said, “Odeen, I must know—I must know so much—” he accepted it as the completion of his own thought and did not even consider it strange.

Carefully he slipped away, trying to adopt a more seemly union without making it seem he was repulsing her.

“Come,” he said. “I've been waiting for you. Tell me what you want to know. I will explain all I can.”

They were moving quickly homeward now, with Odeen adapting himself eagerly to the characteristic waver of the Emotional flow.

Dua said, “Tell me about the other-Universe. Why is it different? How is it different? Tell me all about it.”

It did not occur to Dua that she was asking too much. It *did* occur to Odeen. She felt to him rich with an astonishing quantity of knowledge and he was on the point of asking, *How do you come to know*

enough about the other-Universe to be so curious about it?

He repressed the question. Dua was coming from the direction of the Hard Caverns. Perhaps Losten had been talking to her, suspecting that despite everything Odeen would be too proud of his status to help his Mid-ling.

Not so, thought Odeen gravely. And he would not ask. He would simply explain.

Tritt bustled about them when they returned home. "If you two are going to talk go into Dua's chamber. I will be busy out here. I must see to it that the children are cleaned and exercised. No time for melting now. No melting."

Neither Odeen nor Dua had any thought of disobeying the command. The Parental's home was his castle. The Rational had his Hard Caverns below and the Emotional her meeting places above. The Parental had only his home.

Odeen therefore said, "Yes, Tritt. We'll be out of your way."

And Dua extended a briefly loving part of herself and said, "It's good to see you, Right-dear." (Odeen wondered if her gesture were relief over the fact that there was no pressure to melt. Tritt did tend to overdo that a bit—even more than Parentals generally.)

In her chamber Dua stared at her private feeding place. Ordinarily she ignored it.

It had been Odeen's idea. He knew that such things did exist and, as he explained to Tritt, if Dua did not like to swarm with the other Emotionals it was perfectly possible

to lead Solar energy down into the cavern so that Dua might feed there.

Tritt had been horrified. It wasn't done. The others would laugh. The triad would be disgraced. Why didn't Dua behave as she should?

"Yes, Tritt," Odeen had said, "but she doesn't behave as she should, so why not accommodate her? Is it so terrible? She will eat privately, gain substance, make us happier, become happier herself and maybe learn to swarm in the end."

Tritt allowed it and even Dua allowed it—after some argument—but insisted that it be a simple design. So the arrangement consisted of the two rods that served as electrodes powered by Solar energy, with room for Dua in between. Bare essentials.

Dua rarely used the accommodation, but this time she stared at it and said, "Tritt has decorated it. Unless you did, Odeen."

"I? Of course not."

A pattern of colored clay designs was at the base of each electrode. "I suppose it's his way of saying he wishes I would use it," Dua said, "and I *am* hungry. Besides, if I'm eating, Tritt wouldn't dream of interrupting us, would he?"

"No," said Odeen, gravely. "Tritt would stop the world if he thought its motion might disturb you while you were eating."

Dua said, "Well—I *am* hungry."

Odeen caught a trace of guilt in her. Guilt over Tritt? Over being hungry? Why should Dua feel

guilty about being hungry? Or had she done something that had consumed energy?

He wrenched his mind away from that course impatiently. There were times when a Rational could be too Rational and chase down the track of every stray thought to the detriment of what was important. Right now it was important for him to talk to Dua.

SHE seated herself between electrodes and when she compressed herself to do so, her small size became only too painfully evident. Odeen was hungry himself—he could tell because the electrodes seemed brighter than they ordinarily did and he could taste the food even at the distance and the savor was delicious. But he would eat later.

Dua said, "Don't just sit silent, Left-dear. Tell me. I want to know." She had adopted (unconsciously?) the ovoid character of a Rational, as though to make it clearer that she wanted to be accepted as one.

Odeen said, "I can't explain it all—all the science, I mean—because you haven't had the background. I will try to make it simple and you just listen. You tell me later what you don't understand and I'll try to explain further. You do know by now that everything is made up of tiny particles called atoms and that these are made up of still tinier subatomic particles."

"Yes, yes," said Dua. "That's why we can melt."

"Exactly. Because actually we are mostly empty space. All the particles are far apart and your

particles and mine and Tritt's can all melt together because each set fits into the empty spaces around the other set. The reason matter doesn't fly apart altogether is that the tiny particles do manage to cling together across the space that separates them. There are attractive forces holding them together, the strongest being one we call the nuclear force. It holds the chief subatomic particles tightly together in bunches that are spread widely apart and that are held together by weaker forces. Do you understand that?"

"Only a little bit," said Dua.

"Well, never mind—we can go back later. Matter can exist in different states. It can be especially spread out, as in Emotionals—as in you, Dua. It can be a little less spread out, as in Rationals and in Parentals. Or still less so, as in rock. It can be very compressed or thick, as in the Hard Ones. That's why they're hard. They are filled with particles."

"You mean there's no empty space in them?"

"No, that's not quite what I mean," said Odeen, puzzled as to how to make matter clearer. "They still have a great deal of empty space, but not as much as we do. Particles need a certain amount of empty space and if all they have is that much—just as much as they must have—then other particles can't squeeze in. If particles are forced in pain occurs. That's why the Hard Ones don't like to be touched by us. We Soft Ones have more space between the particles than is actually needed, so other

particles can fit in without hurting.”

Dua did not look at all convinced.

Odeen hastened on. “In the other-Universe the rules are different. The nuclear force isn’t as strong as in ours. That means the particles need more room.”

“Why?”

Odeen shook his head. “Because—because—the particles spread out their wave forms more. I can’t explain better than that. With a weaker nuclear force, the particles need more room and two pieces of matter can’t melt together as easily as they can in our Universe.”

“Can we see the other-Universe?”

“Oh, no. That isn’t possible. We can deduce its nature from its basic laws. The Hard Ones can do a great many things, though. We can send material across and get material from the other-Universe creatures. We can study their material, you see. And we can set up the Positron Pump. You know about that, don’t you?”

“Well, you’ve told me we get energy out of it. I didn’t know there was a different Universe involved. What is the other-Universe like? Does it have stars and worlds?”

“That’s an excellent question, Dua.” Odeen was enjoying his role as teacher much more intensely than usual now that he had official encouragement to speak. (Earlier he had always felt a kind of sneaking perversion in trying to explain things to an Emotional.)

HE SAID, “We can’t see the other-Universe, but we can

calculate what it must be like from its laws. You see, what makes the stars shine is the gradual combination of simple particle combinations into more complicated ones. We call it nuclear fusion.”

“Do they have that in the other-Universe?”

“Yes, but because the nuclear force is weaker, fusion is much slower. This means that the stars must be much, much bigger in the other-Universe—or not enough fusion would take place to make them shine. Stars of the other-Universe that were no bigger than our Sun would be cold and dead. On the other hand, if stars in our Universe were bigger than they are the amount of fusion would be so great it would blow them up. That means that in our Universe there must be thousands of times as many small stars as there are large stars in theirs—”

“We only have seven—” began Dua. Then she added, “Oh, I forgot something—”

Odeen smiled indulgently. It was so easy to forget the uncounted stars that could not be seen except by special instruments. “That’s all right. You don’t mind my boring you with all this?”

“You’re not boring me,” said Dua. “I love it. It even makes food taste good.” And she wavered between the electrodes with a kind of luxurious tremor.

Odeen, who had never before heard Dua say anything complimentary about food, was greatly heartened. He said, “Of course, our Universe doesn’t last as long as theirs. Fusion goes so fast that all

the particles are combined after a million lifetimes."

"But there are many other stars."

"Ah, but you see, they're all going at once. The whole Universe is dying. In the other-Universe, with so many fewer and larger stars, the fusion goes so slowly that the stars last thousands and millions of times as long as ours. It's hard to compare because it may be that time moves at different rates in the two Universes." He added with some reluctance. "I don't understand that part myself. That's part of the Estwald Theory and I haven't got to that very much so far."

"Did Estwald work out all of this?"

"A great deal of it."

Dua said, "It's wonderful that we're getting the food from the other-Universe. I mean, it doesn't matter if our Sun dies out, then. We can get all the food we want from there."

"That's right."

"But does nothing bad happen? I have the—the feeling that something bad happens."

"Well," said Odeen. "We transfer matter back and forth to work the Positron Pump and that means the two Universes mix together a little. Our nuclear force gets a tiny bit weaker, so fusion in our Sun slows up a little and the Sun cools down a little faster. But just a little, and we don't need it any more anyway."

"That's not the something-bad feeling I have. If the nuclear force gets a tiny bit weaker the atoms take up more room—is that right?"

Then what happens to melting?"

"That gets more difficult but it would take many millions of lifetimes before it would get difficult enough to notice. Even if some day melting became impossible and Soft Ones died out—that would happen long, long after we would all have died for lack of food if we weren't using the other-Universe."

"That's still not the something-bad—feeling—" Dua's words were beginning to slur. She wriggled between her electrodes and to Odeen's gratified eyes she seemed noticeably larger and compacter. It was as though his words as well as the food were nourishing her.

Losten was right. Education made her more nearly satisfied with life. Odeen could sense a kind of sensual joy in Dua that he had scarcely ever felt before.

She said, "It is so kind of you to explain, Odeen. You are a good Left-ling."

"Do you want me to go on?" asked Odeen, flattered and more pleased than he could easily say. "Is there anything else you want to ask?"

"A great deal, Odeen, but—not now. Not now, Odeen. Oh, Odeen, do you know what I want to do?"

Odeen guessed at once, but was too cautious to say it openly. Dua's moments of erotic advance were too few to treat with anything but care. He hoped desperately that Tritt had not involved himself with the children to the point where they could not take advantage of this.

But Tritt was already in the chamber. Had he been outside the

door, waiting? Odeen did not care. There was no time to think.

Dua had flowed out from between the electrodes and Odeen's senses were filled with her beauty. She was between them now and through her Tritt shimmered, his outlines flaming in incredible color.

It had never been like this. Never.

Odeen held himself back desperately, letting his own substance flow through Dua and into Tritt an atom at a time, holding away from the overpowering penetrance of Dua with every bit of strength, not giving himself up to the ecstasy, but letting it be wrenched from him—hanging on to his consciousness to the last possible moment and then blanking out in one final transport so intense it felt like an explosion echoing and reverberating endlessly within him.

Never in the lifetime of the triad had the period of melting unconsciousness lasted so long.

3c

TRITT was pleased. The melting had been satisfactory. All previous occasions seemed skimpy and hollow in comparison. He was utterly delighted with what had happened. Yet he kept quiet. He felt it better not to speak.

Odeen and Dua were happy, too. Tritt could tell. Even the children seemed to be glowing.

But Tritt was happiest of all—naturally.

He listened to Odeen and Dua talk. That he understood none of it did not matter. He didn't mind that they seemed so pleased with each

other. He had his own pleasure and was content to listen.

Dua said on one occasion. "And do they really try to communicate with us?"

(Tritt never got it quite clear who "they" might be. He gathered that "communicate" was a fancy word for "talk." So why didn't they say "talk?" Sometimes he wondered if he should interrupt. But if he asked questions Odeen would only say, "Now, Tritt—" and Dua would swirl impatiently.)

"Oh, yes," said Odeen. "The Hard Ones are quite sure of that. The other-beings have put markings on the material that is sent us sometimes and the Hard Ones say that it is perfectly possible to communicate by such markings. Long ago, in fact, they used markings in reverse, when it was necessary to explain to the other-beings how to set up their part of the Positron Pump—in their Universe it is an Electron Pump."

"I wonder what the other-beings look like. What do you suppose?"

"From the laws we can work out the nature of the stars because that is simple. But how can we work out the nature of the beings? We can never know."

"Couldn't they communicate what they look like?"

"If we understood what they communicated, perhaps we could make out something. But we don't understand."

Dua seemed aggrieved. "Don't the Hard Ones understand?"

"I don't know. If they do they haven't told me. Losten once said it didn't matter what they were like as

long as the Pump worked and was enlarged."

"Maybe he just didn't want you bothering him."

Odeen said huffily. "I don't bother him."

"Oh, you know what I mean. He just didn't want to get into those details."

By that time Tritt could no longer listen. They went on arguing for quite a while over whether the Hard Ones should let Dua look at the markings or not. Dua said that she might sense what they said, perhaps.

Her remark made Tritt a little angry. After all, Dua was only a Soft One and not even a Rational. He began to wonder if Odeen were right to tell her all he did. It gave Dua funny ideas.

Dua could see Odeen was angry, too. First he laughed. Then he said that an Emotional could not handle such complicated ideas. Then he refused to talk at all. Dua had to be very pleasant to him till he came around.

ON ONE occasion—it was Dua who was angry—absolutely furious. The moment began quietly. In fact, it was on one of the times when the two children were with them. Odeen was letting them play with him. He didn't even mind when Little-right Torun pulled at him. In fact, he let himself go in most undignified fashion. He didn't seem to mind that he was all out of shape. It was a sure sign he was pleased. Tritt remained in a corner, resting, he was so satisfied with what was happening.

Dua laughed at Odeen's misshapeness. She let her own substance touch Odeen's knobishness flirtatiously. She knew very well that the leftish surface was sensitive when out of ovoid.

Dua said, "I've been thinking, Odeen. If the other-Universe gets its laws into ours just a bit through the Pump, doesn't our own Universe get its laws into theirs the same little bit?"

Odeen howled at Dua's touch and tried to avoid her without upsetting the little ones. He gasped, "I can't answer unless you stop, you Mid-ling wretch."

She stopped and he said, "That's a good thought, Dua. You're an amazing creature. It's true, of course. The mixture goes both ways. Tritt, take out the little ones, will you?"

But they scurried off by themselves. They were not such little ones. They were quite grown. Annis would soon be starting his education and Torun was already quite Parentally blockish.

Tritt stayed and thought Dua looked very beautiful when Odeen talked to her in this way.

Dua said, "If the other laws slow down our Suns and cool them down—don't our laws speed up theirs and heat them up?"

"Exactly right, Dua. A Rational couldn't do better."

"How hot do their Suns get?"

"Just slightly hotter, very slightly."

Dua said, "But that's where I keep getting the something-bad feeling."

"Oh, well, the trouble is that their

Suns are so huge. If our little Suns get a littler cooler it doesn't matter. Even if they turned off altogether it wouldn't matter as long as we have the Positron Pump. With great, huge stars, though—getting them even a little hotter is troublesome. There so much material in one of those stars that turning up the nuclear fusion even a little way will make it explode."

"Explode? But then what happens to the beings?"

"What beings?"

"The beings in the other-Universe."

For a moment Odeen looked blank. Then he said, "I don't know."

"Well, what would happen if our own Sun exploded?"

"It couldn't explode."

(Tritt wondered what all the excitement was about. How could a Sun explode? Dua seemed angrier and Odeen looked confused.)

Dua said, "But if it did? Would it get very hot?"

"I suppose so."

"Wouldn't it kill us all?"

Odeen hesitated and then said in clear annoyance. "What difference does it make, Dua? Our Sun isn't exploding. Don't ask silly questions."

"You told me to ask questions, Odeen, and it does make a difference, because the Pump works both ways. We need their end as much as they need ours."

Odeen stared at her. "I never told you that."

"I feel it."

Odeen said, "You feel a great many things. Dua—"

But Dua was shouting now. She

was quite beside herself. Tritt had never seen her like that. She said, "Don't change the subject, Odeen. And don't withdraw and try to make me out a complete fool—just another Emotional. You said I was almost like a Rational and I'm enough like one to see that our Positron Pump won't work without the other-beings. If the beings in the other-Universe are destroyed, their end of the Pump will stop and our Sun will be colder than ever and we'll all starve. Don't you think that's important?"

Odeen, too, was shouting now. "That shows what you know. We need their help because the energy supply is in low concentration and we have to switch matter. If the Sun in the other-Universe explodes there'll be an enormous flood of energy—a huge flood that will last for a million lifetimes. There will be so much energy, we could tap it directly without any matter-shift either way—so we don't need them. And it doesn't matter what happens—"

They were almost touching now. Tritt was horrified. He had better say something, make them get apart, talk to them. He couldn't think of anything to say. Then it turned out he didn't have to.

There was a Hard One just outside the cavern. No, three of them. They had been trying to talk and hadn't made themselves heard.

Tritt shrieked, "Odeen! Dua!"

Then he remained quiet, trembling. He had a frightened notion of what the Hard Ones had come to talk about. He decided to leave.

But a Hard One put out one of

his permanent, opaque appendages and said, "Don't go."

The words sounded harsh, unfriendly. Tritt was more frightened than ever.

4a

DUA was filled with anger, so filled she could scarcely sense the Hard Ones. She seemed stifled under the components of the anger, each one filling her to the brim, separately. She knew a sense of wrongness that Odeen should try to lie to her. Another sense of wrongness that a whole world of beings should die. A third sense of wrongness that it was so easy for her to learn and that she had never been allowed to.

Since that time in the rock she had gone twice more to the Hard Caverns. Twice more, unnoticed, she had buried herself in rock, and each time she sensed and knew—so that when Odeen would explain matters to her she knew in advance what he would explain.

Why couldn't they teach her, then, as they had taught Odeen? Why only the Rationals? Did she possess the capacity to learn only because she was a Left-Em, a perverted Mid-ling? Then let them teach her, perversion and all. It was wrong to leave her ignorant.

Finally the words of the Hard One were breaking through to her. Losten was there, but he was not speaking. A strange Hard One spoke. She did not know him.

The Hard One asked, "Which of you has been in the lower caverns recently—the Hard Caverns?"

Dua was defiant. They had found her rock-rubbing and she didn't care. Let them tell everybody. She would do so herself.

She said, "I have. Many times."

"Alone?" asked the Hard One calmly.

"Alone. Many times," snapped Dua.

Odeen muttered, "I have, of course, been to the lower caverns on occasion."

The Hard One ignored Odeen. He turned to Tritt instead and asked sharply. "And you, Right?"

Tritt quavered, "Yes, Hard-Sir."

"Alone?"

"Yes, Hard-Sir."

"How often?"

"Once."

Dua was annoyed. Poor Tritt was in such a panic over nothing. She was ready for a confrontation.

"Leave him alone," she said. "I'm the one you want."

The Hard One turned slowly toward her. "For what?" he asked.

"For—whatever it is." And faced with the prospect directly, she could not bring herself to describe what she had done after all. Not in front of Odeen.

"Well, we'll get to you. First, the Right. Your name is Tritt, isn't it? Why did you go to the lower caverns alone?"

"To speak to Hard One Estwald, Hard-sir."

Dua interrupted eagerly: "Are you Estwald?"

The Hard One said briefly, "No."

Odeen looked annoyed, as though it embarrassed him that Dua did not recognize the Hard One.

The Hard One asked Tritt,

“What did you take from the lower caverns?”

Tritt was silent.

The Hard One said without emotion. “We know you took something. We want to know if you know what it was. It could be very dangerous.”

Tritt was still silent and Losten interposed, saying more kindly, “Please tell us, Tritt. We know now it was you and we don’t want to have to be harsh.”

Tritt mumbled. “I took a food-ball.”

“Ah.” It was the first Hard One speaking. “What did you do with it?”

And Tritt burst out. “It was for Dua. She wouldn’t eat. It was for Dua.”

Dua jumped and coalesced in astonishment.

The Hard One turned on her at once. “You did not know about it?”

“No.”

“Nor you?” To Odeen.

Odeen, so motionless as to seem frozen, said, “No, Hard-Sir.”

For a moment the air was full of unpleasant vibration as the Hard Ones spoke to each other, ignoring the triad.

Whether her sessions at rock-rubbing had made her more sensitive or whether her recent storm of emotions had increased her awareness Dua could not tell, but she was catching hints—not of words—but of meanings.

The Hard Ones had detected the loss some time ago. They had been searching quietly. They had turned to the Soft Ones as possible cul-

prits with reluctance. They had investigated and finally focused on Odeen’s triad with even greater reluctance. (Why? Dua missed that.) They had not seen how Odeen could have had the foolishness to take the thing—or Dua the inclination. They had not thought of Tritt at all.

Then the Hard One who had so far not said a word to the Soft Ones had recalled seeing Tritt in the Hard Caverns. (Of course, thought Dua—Tritt had been there on the day she had first entered the rock. She had sensed him then. She had forgotten.)

All this Dua sensed and now she turned toward Tritt, feeling mingled wonder and outrage.

Losten was anxiously vibrating that no harm had been done, that Dua looked well, that what had happened was actually a useful experiment. The Hard One to whom Tritt had spoken was agreeing—the other still exuded concern.

Dua was looking at Tritt.

The first Hard One said, “Where is the food-ball now, Tritt?”

Tritt showed them.

It was hidden effectively and the connections were clumsy but serviceable.

The Hard One said, “Did you do this yourself, Tritt?”

“Yes, Hard-Sir.”

“How did you know the method?”

“I looked at how it was done in the Hard Caverns. I did it exactly the way I saw it done there.”

“Didn’t you know you might have harmed your Mid-ling?”

“I didn’t—I wouldn’t—I—”

Tritt seemed unable to say more for a moment. Then he managed: "It was not to hurt her. It was to feed her. I let it pour into her feeder and I decorated her feeder. I wanted her to try it and she did. She ate! For the first time in a long while she ate well. We melted." He paused, then said in a huge, tumultuous cry, "She had enough energy at last to initiate a baby-Emotional. She took Odeen's seed and passed it to me. I have it growing inside me."

Dua could not speak. She withdrew and then rushed for the exit in so pell-mell a fashion that the Hard Ones could not get out of the way in time. She struck the appendage of the one in front, passing deep into it, then pulled free with a harsh sound.

The Hard One's appendage fell limp and he seemed contorted with pain. Odeen tried to dodge around him to follow Dua, but the Hard One said with apparent difficulty, "Let her go for now. There is enough harm done. We will take care."

4b

ODEEN found himself living through a nightmare. Dua was gone. The Hard Ones were gone. Only Tritt was still here—silent.

How could it have happened? How could Tritt have found his way alone to the Hard Caverns? How could he have taken a storage cell charged at the Pump and designed to yield radiation in much more concentrated form than Sunlight and dared—

Odeen would not have had the courage to chance it. How could Tritt, stumbling, ignorant Tritt have found it? Was he unusual, too? Odeen, the clever Rational—Dua, the curious Emotional—and Tritt, the daring Parental?

He said, "How could you do it, Tritt?"

Tritt retorted hotly, "What did I do? I fed her. I fed her better than she had ever been fed before. Now we have a baby-Emotional initiated at last. Haven't we waited long enough? We would have waited forever if we had waited for Dua."

"But don't you understand, Tritt? You might have hurt her. It wasn't ordinary Sunlight. It was an experimental radiation formula that could have been too concentrated to be safe."

"I don't understand what you're saying, Odeen. How could it do harm? I tasted the kind of food the Hard Ones made before. It tasted bad. You've tasted it, too. It tasted just awful and it never hurt us. It tasted so bad, Dua wouldn't touch it. Then I came on the food-ball. It tasted good. I ate some and it was delicious. How can anything delicious hurt? Dua ate it. She liked it. And it started the baby-Emotional. How can I have done wrong?"

Odeen despaired of explaining. He said, "Dua is going to be very angry."

"She'll get over it."

"I wonder. Tritt, she's not like ordinary Emotionals. That's what makes her so hard to live with, but so wonderful when we *can* live with her. She may never want to melt

with us again. And then what?"

Tritt's outline was sturdily plane-surfaced. He asked, "Well, what of it?"

"What of it? Do you want to give up melting?"

"No, but if she won't she won't. I have my third baby and I don't care any more. I know all about the Soft Ones in the old days. They used to have two triad-births sometimes. But I don't care. One is plenty."

"But, Tritt, babies aren't all there is to melting."

"What else? I heard you say once you learned faster after you melted. Then learn slower. I don't care. I have my third baby."

Odeen turned away trembling and flowed jerkily out of the chamber. What was the use of scolding Tritt? Tritt wouldn't understand. He wasn't sure he himself understood.

Once the third baby was born and grown a little, the time would come to pass on. He, Odeen, would have to give the signal, would have to say when—and it would have to be done without fear. Anything else would be a disgrace—or worse—yet he would not be able to face the event without melting even when all three children had been formed.

Melting would eliminate the fear—maybe because melting was like passing on. There was a period of time when you were not conscious, yet it did not hurt. It was like not existing and yet it was desirable. With enough melting he could gain the courage to pass on without fear and without. . .

Oh, Sun and all the stars, it wasn't "passing on." Why use that phrase so solemnly? He knew the other word that was never used except by children who wanted to shock their elders. The word was *dying*. He had to get ready to die without fear and to have Dua and Tritt die with him.

And he did not know how. Not without melting.

4c

TRITT remained alone in the room, frightened, but sturdily resolved to remain unmoved. He had his third baby. He could feel it within him.

That was what counted.

That was all that counted.

Why, then, deep inside, did he have a stubborn, faint feeling that it was not all that counted?

5a

DUA was ashamed almost beyond endurance. It took a long time for her to battle down that shame—battle it down enough to give herself room to think. She had hastened—moving blindly—away from the horror of the home cavern, scarcely caring that she did not know where she was going or even where she was.

It was night, a time when no decent Soft One would be on the surface, not even the most frivolous Emotional. It would be quite a while before the Sun rose. Dua was glad. The Sun was food and at the moment she hated food and what had been done to her.

It was cold, too, but Dua was only distantly aware of it. Why should she care about cold, she wondered, when she had been fattened in order that she might do her duty—fattened, mind and body? After that, cold and starvation had become her friends.

She saw through Tritt. Poor thing—his actions were motivated by pure instinct and he was to be praised that he had followed through so bravely. He had come back so daringly from the Hard Caverns with the food-ball (and she had sensed him and would have known what was happening if Tritt had not been so paralyzed at what he was doing that he had not dared to think of it—and if *she* had not been so paralyzed at what *she* was doing that she had been unable to sense what she most needed to know.)

Tritt had brought the food-ball back undetected and had arranged the pitiful booby-trap, decorating her feeder to entice her. And she had come back, flushed with awareness of her rock-probing thinness, filled with the shame of it and with pity for Tritt. With all that shame and pity she had eaten and had helped to intiate conception.

Clever Odeen, she thought, must have seen through Tritt's plan, must have spied the new connections to the electrodes, must have understood Tritt's purpose. Probably he had said nothing to Tritt. To do so would have embarrassed and frightened the poor Right-ling and Odeen always watched over Tritt with loving care.

Odeen had needed to say nothing.

He needed only to fill in the gaps in Tritt's clumsy plan to make it work.

Dua was under no illusions now. She would have detected the taste of the food-ball, noticed its extraordinary tang, caught the rapidity with which it had begun to satisfy her while giving her no sensations of fullness—had it not been for Odeen's occupying her with talk.

It had been a conspiracy between the two of them, whether Tritt had been consciously part of it or not. How could she have believed that Odeen was suddenly a careful, painstaking teacher? How could she have failed to see the ulterior motive? Their concern for her was their concern for the completion of the new triad—and that in itself was an indication of how little they thought of her.

SHE paused long enough to feel her own weariness and worked herself into a crevice in the rock that would shield her from the thin, cold wind. Two of the seven stars were in her field of vision and she watched them absently, occupying her outer senses with trivia so that she might concentrate the more in internal thought.

"Betrayed," she whispered to herself. "Betrayed!"

Could Odeen and Tritt not see beyond themselves?

That Tritt would be willing to see all destroyed if he were but secure in his babies was comprehensible. He was a creature of instinct. But what of Odeen?

Odeen reasoned. Did his talent mean that for the purpose of exer-

cising his reason he would sacrifice all else? Was its own excuse for being—at any cost—the sole product of reason? Because Estwald had devised that so-called Positron Pump, did it have to be used in order that the beings of a whole world, Hard and Soft alike, be placed at its mercy—and at that of the beings of the other-Universe? What if the other-beings stopped and the world was left without the Pump and with a dangerously cooled Sun?

No, they wouldn't stop, those other-beings. They had been persuaded to start and they would be persuaded to keep going until they were destroyed—and then they would be needed no longer by the Rationals, Hard or Soft—just as she, Dua, would have to pass on (be destroyed) now that she was needed no longer.

She and the other-beings were both being betrayed.

Almost without being aware of doing so, she was cushioning deeper and deeper into the rock. She buried herself out of sight of the stars, out of touch with the wind, unaware of the world. She was pure thought.

Estwald was the one she hated. He was the personification of all that was selfish and hard. He had devised the Pump and would destroy a whole world of perhaps tens of thousands without conscience. He was so withdrawn that he never made his appearance and so powerful that even the other Hard Ones seemed afraid of him.

Well, then, she would fight him. She would stop him.

The beings of the other-Universe had assisted in setting up the Positron Pump through communications of some sort. Odeen had mentioned those. Where would such communications be kept? What would they be like? How could they be used for further communication?

It was remarkable how clearly she could think. Remarkable. There was fierce enjoyment in this, that she would use reason to overcome the cruel reasoners.

They would not be able to stop her for she could go where no Hard One could go, where no Rational or Parental could—and where no other Emotional would.

She might be caught eventually, but at the moment she didn't care. She was going to fight to have her way—at any price—though to do so meant she would have to go through rock, live in rock, skirt the Hard Caverns, steal food from their stored energy cells when she had to, flock with the other Emotionals and feed on Sunlight when she could.

But in the end she would teach them all a lesson and after that they could do as they wished. She would even be ready to pass on then—but only then.

5b

O DEEN was present when the new baby-Emotional was born, perfect in every way, but he had not been able to feel enthusiasm over it. Even Tritt, who cared for it perfectly, as a Parental must, seemed subdued in his ecstasies.

A long time had passed and it was as though Dua had vanished. She had not passed on. A Soft One could not pass on except when the whole triad did—but she was not with the triad either. It was as though she had passed on without passing on.

Odeen had seen her once, only once, not very long after her wild flight on the news that she had initiated the new baby.

He had passed a cluster of Emotionals Sunning themselves when he had been moving over the surface with some foolish notion that he might find her. They had tittered at the rare sight of a Rational moving in the vicinity of an Emotional cluster and had thinned in mass provocation, with no thought among the foolish lot of them but to advertise the fact that they were Emotionals.

Odeen felt only contempt for them and there was no answering stir along his own smooth curves at all. He thought of Dua instead and of how different she was from all of them. Dua never thinned for any reason other than her own inner needs. She had never tried to attract anyone and was the more attractive for that. If she could have brought herself to join the flock of empty-heads she would be easily recognized (he felt sure) by the fact that she alone would not thin—but would probably thicken precisely because the others thinned.

As the thought struck him Odeen scanned the Sunning Emotionals and noted that one indeed had not thinned.

He stopped, then hastened

toward her, oblivious to the Emotionals in his way, disregarding their wild screeching as they flicked smokily out of his path and chattered desperately in their attempts to avoid coalescing one with the other right out in the open and with a Rational watching.

It was Dua. She did not try to leave. She kept her ground and said nothing.

"Dua," he said humbly, "aren't you coming home?"

"I have no home, Odeen," she said. Not angrily, not in hate—and all the more dreadfully for that reason.

"How can you blame Tritt for what he did, Dua? You know the poor fellow can't reason."

"But you can, Odeen. And you occupied my mind while he arranged to feed my body, didn't you? Your reason told you that I was much more likely to be trapped by you than by him."

"Dua, no!"

"No, what? Didn't you make a big show of teaching me, of educating me?"

"I did, but it wasn't a show—it was real. And it was not because of what Tritt had done. I didn't know what Tritt had done."

"I can't believe that." She flowed away without haste. He followed her. They were alone now, the Sun shining redly down upon them.

She turned to him. "Let me ask you one question, Odeen? Why did you want to teach me?"

Odeen said, "Because I wanted to. Because I enjoy teaching and because I would rather teach than do anything else—but learn."

"And melt, of course. Never mind," she added to ward him off. "Don't explain that you are talking of reason and not of instinct. If you really mean what you say about enjoying teaching—if I can really believe what you say—then perhaps you can understand something I'm going to tell you. I've been learning a great deal since I left you, Odeen. Never mind how. I have. There's no Emotional left in me at all, except physiologically. Inside, where it counts, I'm all Rational, except that I hope I have more feeling for others than Rationals have. And one thing I've learned is what we really are, Odeen—you and I and Tritt and all the other triads on this planet—what we really are and always were."

"What is that?" asked Odeen.

HE WAS prepared to listen for as long as might be necessary—and as quietly—if only she would come back with him when she had said her say. He would perform any penance, do anything that might be required. Only she must come back—and something dim and dark inside him knew that she had to come back voluntarily.

"What we are? Why, nothing, really, Odeen," she said lightly, almost laughing. "Isn't that strange? The Hard Ones are the only living species on the face of the world. Haven't they taught you that? There is only one species because you and I, the Soft Ones, are not really alive. We're machines, Odeen. We must be because only the Hard Ones are alive. Haven't

they taught you that, Odeen?"

"But, Dua, that's nonsense," said Odeen, nonplused.

Dua's voice grew harsher. "Machines, Odeen! Made by the Hard Ones! Destroyed by the Hard Ones! They are alive, the Hard Ones. Only they. They don't talk about it much. They don't have to. They all know it. But I've learned to think, Odeen, and I've worked it out from the small clues I've found. They live tremendously long lives, but die eventually. They no longer give birth—the Sun yields too little energy for that. And since they die very infrequently, but don't give birth at all, their numbers are very slowly declining. And there are no young ones to provide new blood and new thoughts so the old, long-lived Hard Ones get terribly bored. So what do you suppose they do, Odeen?"

"What?" There was a kind of fascination about this. A repulsive fascination.

"They manufacture mechanical children whom they can teach. You said it yourself, Odeen. You would rather teach than do anything else but learn. And melt, of course. The Rationals are made in the mental image of the Hard Ones. The Hard Ones don't melt and learning is terribly complex for them since they already know so much. What is left for them but the fun of teaching? Rationals were created for no purpose but to be taught. Emotionals and Parentals were created because they were necessary for the self-perpetuating machinery that made new Rationals. And new Rationals were needed

constantly because the old ones were used up, were taught all they could be taught. And when old Rationals had absorbed what they could they were destroyed and were taught, in advance, to call the destruction process "passing on" to spare their feelings. And of course, Emotional and Parentals passed on with them. As long as they had helped form a new triad there was no further use for them."

"But that's all wrong, Dua," Odeen managed to say. He had no arguments to pose against her nightmare scheme, but he knew with a certainty past argument that she was wrong. (Or did a little pang of doubt deep inside him suggest that the certainty might have been implanted in him to begin with? No, surely no—for then, would not Dua be implanted with a certainty, too, that this was wrong? Or was she an imperfect Emotional without the proper implantations and without— Oh, what was he thinking? He was as crazy as she.)

Dua said, "You look upset, Odeen. Are you sure I'm all wrong? Of course, now the Hard Ones have the Pump and all the energy they need. Soon they will be giving birth again. Maybe they are doing so already. And they won't need any Soft-One machines at all and we will all be destroyed—I beg pardon, we will all pass on."

"No, Dua," said Odeen strenuously as much to himself as to her. "I don't know how you got those notions, but the Hard Ones aren't like that. We are not destroyed."

"Don't lie to yourself, Odeen. They *are* like that. They are pre-

pared to destroy a whole world of other-beings for their benefit, a whole Universe if they have to. Would they stop at destroying a few Soft Ones for their comfort? But they made one mistake. Somehow the machinery went wrong and a Rational mind got into an Emotional body. I'm a Left-Em, do you know that? They called me that when I was a child and they were right. I can reason like a Rational and I can feel like an Emotional. And I will fight the Hard Ones with that combination."

Odeen felt wild. Dua must surely be mad, yet he dared not say so. He had to cajole her somehow and bring her back. He said with sincerity, "Dua, we're not destroyed when we pass on."

"No? What does happen then?"

"I—I don't know. I think we enter another world, a better and happier world and become like—like—well, much better than we are."

Dua laughed. "Where did you hear that? Did the Hard Ones tell you that?"

"No, Dua. I'm sure that this must be so out of my own thoughts. I've been thinking a great deal since you left."

Dua said, "Then think less and you'll be less foolish. Poor Odeen! Goodbye." She flowed away once more, thinly. There was an air of weariness about her.

Odeen called out, "But wait, Dua. Surely you want to see your new baby-mid."

She did not answer.

He cried out, "When will you come home?"

She did not answer.

And he followed no more, but looked after her in deepest misery as she dwindled.

HE DID not tell Tritt he had seen Dua. What was the use? Nor did he see her again. He began haunting the favored Sunning sites of the Emotionals of the region, doing so even though occasional Parentals emerged to watch him in stupid suspicion (Tritt was a mental giant compared to most Parentals).

The lack of her hurt more with each passing day. And with each passing day he realized that there was a gathering fright inside himself over her absence. He didn't know why.

He came back to the home cavern one day to find Losten waiting for him. Losten was standing, grave and polite, while Tritt was showing him the new baby and striving to keep the handful of mist from touching the Hard One.

Losten said, "It is indeed a beauty, Tritt. Derala is its name?"

"Derola," Tritt corrected. "I don't know when Odeen will be back. He wanders about a lot."

"Here I am, Losten," said Odeen hastily. "Tritt, take the baby away, there's a good fellow."

Tritt did so and Losten turned to Odeen with quite obvious relief, saying, "You must be very happy to have completed the triad."

Odeen tried to answer with some polite inconsequence, but could maintain only a miserable silence. He had recently been developing a kind of comradeship, a vague sense

of equality with the Hard Ones that enabled them to talk together on a level. Somehow Dua's madness had spoiled it. Odeen knew she was wrong and yet he approached Losten once more as stiffly as in the long-gone days when he had thought of himself as a creature far inferior to them—as a machine?

Losten asked, "Have you seen Dua?" The question was real, not mere politeness, Odeen could tell.

"Only once, H—" (He almost said "Hard-Sir" as though he were a child again or a Parental). "Only once, Losten. She won't come home."

"She *must* come home," said Losten softly.

"I don't know how to arrange that."

Losten regarded him somberly. "Do you know what she is doing?"

Odeen did not dare to look at the Hard One. Had Losten discovered Dua's wild theories? What would be done about that?

He made a negative sign without speaking.

Losten said, "She is a most unusual Emotional, Odeen. We have spoken of that."

"Yes." Odeen sighed.

"As unusual as you are in your way and Tritt in his. I doubt that any other Parental in the world would have had either the courage or the initiative to steal an energy storage cell or the perverse ingenuity to put it to use as he did. The three of you make up the most unique triad of which we have any record."

"Thank you."

"But there are uncomfortable aspects to the triad, too, things we didn't count on. We wanted you to teach her by way of cajoling her into performing her function in the triad. We did not count on Tritt's quixotic action at just that moment. Nor, to tell you the truth, did we count on her wild reaction to the fact that the world in the other-Universe must be destroyed."

"I ought to have been careful how I answered her questions," said Odeen miserably.

"Caution would not have helped. She was finding out for herself. We didn't count on that either. Odeen, I am sorry, but I must tell you this—Dua has become a deadly danger. She is trying to stop the Positron Pump."

"But how can she? She can't reach it—and even if she could she lacks the knowledge to do anything about it."

"Oh, but she can reach it." Losten hesitated, then said, "She remains infused in the rock of the world where she is safe from us."

It took a while for Odeen to grasp the clear meaning of the words. He said, "No grown Emotional would—Dua would never—"

"She would. She does. Don't waste time arguing the point. She can penetrate anywhere in the caverns. Nothing is hidden from her. She has studied those communications we have received from the other-Universe. There is no other way of explaining what is happening."

"Oh, oh, oh." Odeen rocked back and forth, his surface opaque with shame and grief. "Does Estwald

know anything of all this?"

Losten said, grimly, "Not yet, though he must know some day."

"But what will she do with those communications?"

"She is using them to work out a method for sending some of her own in the other direction."

"But she cannot know how to translate or transmit."

"She is learning both. She knows more about those communications than Estwald himself. She is a frightening phenomenon, an Emotional who can reason and who is out of control."

Odeen shivered. Out of control? How machinelike a reference?

He said, "It can't be that bad."

"It can. She has communicated already and I fear she is advising the other-Universe creatures to stop their half of the Pump. If they do so before their Sun explodes we will be helpless at this end."

"But then—"

"She must be stopped, Odeen."

"But, how? Are you going to blast—" His voice failed. Dimly he knew that the Hard One had devices for digging caverns out of the world's rock, devices scarcely used since the world's population had begun declining ages ago. Would they locate Dua in the rock and blast it and her?

"No," said Losten forcefully. "We cannot harm Dua."

"Estwald might—"

"Estwald cannot harm her either."

"Then what's to be done?"

"It's you, Odeen. Only you. We're helpless, so we must depend on you."

"On me? But what can I do?"

"Think about it," said Losten urgently. "Think about it."

"Think about what?"

"I can't say more than that," said Losten in apparent agony. "Think! There is so little time."

He turned and left, moving rapidly for a Hard One, moving as though he did not trust himself to stay and perhaps say too much.

And Odeen could only look after him, dismayed, confused—lost.

5c

THERE was a great deal for Tritt to do. Babies required much care, but two young lefts and two young rights together did not make up the sum of a single baby-mid—particularly not a mid as perfect as Derola. She had to be exercised and soothed, protected from percolating into whatever she touched, cajoled into condensing and resting.

It was a long time before he saw Odeen again and actually he didn't care. Derola took up all his time. But then he came across Odeen in the corner of his own alcove, iridescent with thought.

Tritt remembered suddenly. He asked, "Was Losten angry about Dua?"

Odeen came to himself with a start. "Losten? Yes, he was angry. Dua is doing great harm."

"She should come home, shouldn't she?"

Odeen was staring at Tritt. He said, "We're going to have to persuade Dua to come home. We must find her first. You can do it. With

a new baby your Parental sensitivity is very high. You can use it to find Dua."

"No," said Tritt, shocked. "It's used for Derola. It would be wrong to use it for Dua. Besides, if she wants to stay away so long when a baby-mid is longing for her—and she once a baby-mid herself—maybe we might just learn to do without her."

"But, Tritt, don't you ever want to melt again?"

"Well, the triad is now complete."

"That's not all there is to melting."

Tritt said, "But where do we have to go to find her? Little Derola needs me. She's a tiny baby. I don't want to leave her."

"The Hard Ones will arrange to have Derola taken care of. You and I will go to the Hard Caverns and find Dua."

Tritt thought about that. He didn't care about Dua. He didn't even care about Odeen, somehow. Only Derola mattered. He said, "Some day when Derola is older. Not till then."

"Tritt," Odeen pressed urgently, "we must find Dua. Otherwise—otherwise the babies will be taken away from us."

"By whom?"

"By the Hard Ones."

Tritt was silent. He could find nothing to say. He had never heard of such a thing. He could not conceive of such a thing.

Odeen said, "Tritt, we must pass on. I know why at last. I've been thinking about it ever since Losten—but never mind that. Dua and you must pass on, too. Now that I

know why, you will feel you must and I hope—I think—Dua will feel she must, too. And we must pass on soon, for Dua is destroying the world.”

Tritt was backing away. “Don’t look at me like that, Odeen. You’re forcing me. You’re making me—”

“I’m not forcing you, Tritt,” said Odeen sadly. “It’s just that I know now and so you must. But we must find Dua.”

“No, no.” Tritt was in agony, trying to resist. There was something terribly new about Odeen and existence was approaching an end inexorably. There would be no Tritt and no baby-mid. Where every other Parental had his baby-mid for a long time, Tritt would have lost his almost at once.

It wasn’t fair. Oh, it wasn’t fair.

Tritt panted. “It’s Dua’s fault. Let her pass on first.”

Odeen said, with deadening calm. “There’s no other way but for all of us—”

And Tritt knew that was so—that was so—that was so—

6a

DUA felt thin and cold. Her attempts to rest in the open and absorb Sunlight had ended after Odeen had found her that time. Her feeding at the Hard Ones’ energy cells was erratic. She dared not remain too long outside the safety of rock, so she ate quickly and never got enough.

She was continuously conscious of hunger. To remain in the rock seemed to tire her. It was as though she were being punished for all

that long time when she had haunted the Sunset and eaten so skimpily.

If it were not for the work she was doing she could not have borne the weariness and hunger. Sometimes she hoped that the Hard Ones would destroy her—but only after she had finished.

The Hard Ones were helpless as long as she was in the rock. Sometimes she sensed them in the open outside the rock. They were afraid. Sometimes she thought their fear was *for* her, but that couldn’t be. How could they be afraid for her? Were they afraid that she would pass on out of sheer lack of food, out of sheer exhaustion? It had to be that they were afraid *of* her—afraid of a machine that did not work as they had designed it to work, appalled at so great a prodigy, struck helpless with terror of it.

She avoided them carefully. She always knew where they were, so they could not catch her or stop her.

They could not watch all places always. She thought she could even blank what little perception they had.

She swirled out of the rock and studied the recorded duplicates of the communications they had received from the other-Universe. They did not know what she was after. If they hid them, she would find them in whatever new place. If they destroyed them, it didn’t matter. Dua could remember them.

She did not understand them at first, but her senses grew steadily sharper—more and more she

seemed to understand without understanding. Without knowing what the symbols meant, they inspired feelings within her.

She picked out markings and placed them where they would be sent to the other-Universe. The markings were F-E-E-R. What that could possibly mean she had no idea, but its shape inspired her with a feeling of fear and she did her best to impress that feeling upon the markings. Perhaps the other-creatures, studying the markings, would also feel fear.

When the answers came Dua could sense excitement in them. She did not always get the answers that were sent. Sometimes the Hard Ones found them first. Surely, they must be finding out what she was doing. Still, they could not read the messages, could not even sense the emotions that went along with them.

So she didn't care. She would not be stopped before she finished, no matter what the Hard Ones found out.

She waited for a message that would carry the feeling she wanted. It came: P-U-M-P B-A-D.

It carried the fear and hatred she wanted. She sent it back in extended form—more fear—more hatred. Now the other-beings would understand. Now they would stop the Pump. The Hard Ones would have to find some other way, some other source of energy—they must not obtain it through the death of all those thousands of other-Universe creatures.

She was resting too much, declining into a kind of stupor within

the rock. She craved food desperately and waited for a chance to crawl out. Even more desperately than she wanted the food in a storage cell she wanted that storage cell to be dead. She wanted to suck the last bit of energy out of it and know that no more would come and that her task was done.

She emerged at last and remained recklessly long, sucking in the contents of one of the cells. She wanted to empty it, see that no more was entering—but it was an endless source—endless—endless.

She stirred and drew away in disgust. The Pump action in the other-Universe was still going, then. Had her messages not persuaded the other-beings to stop the Pump? Had they not received her signals? Had they not sensed their meaning?

She had to try again. She had to make matters plain beyond plain. She would include every combination of symbols that to her seemed to carry the feeling of danger; every combination that would put across the plea to stop.

Desperately she began to fuse the symbols into metal; drawing without reserve on the energy she had just absorbed—drawing on it till it was all gone and she was more weary than ever: PUMP NOT STOP NOT STOP WE NOT STOP PUMP WE NOT HEAR DANGER NOT HEAR NOT HEAR YOU STOP PLEASE STOP YOU STOP SO WE STOP PLEASE YOU STOP DANGER DANGER DANGER DANGER STOP STOP YOU STOP PUMP.

It was all she could do. There was

nothing left in her but a racking pain. She placed the message where it could be transferred and she did not wait for Hard Ones to send the message unwittingly. Through an agonizing haze she manipulated the controls as she had seen them do, finding the energy for it somehow.

The message disappeared and so did the cavern in a purple shimmer of vertigo. She was—passing on—out of sheer—exhaustion.

Odeen—Tri—

6bc

ODEEN came. He had been flowing faster than he had ever flowed before. He had been following Tritt's new-baby sharpened sense perception, but now he was close enough for his own blunter senses to detect her nearness. He could on his own account feel the flickering and fading consciousness of Dua and he raced forward while Tritt did his best to clump along, gasping and calling, "Faster—faster—"

Odeen found her in a state of collapse, scarcely alive, smaller than he had ever seen an adult Emotional.

"Tritt," he said, "Bring the food-ball here. No, don't try to carry her. She's too thin to carry. Hurry. If she sinks into the floor—"

The Hard Ones began to gather. They were late, of course, with their inability to sense other life forms at a distance. If saving Dua had depended only on them she would have perished. She would

not have passed on—she would truly have been destroyed and more than she knew would have been destroyed with her.

Now, as she was slowly gathering life, the Hard Ones stood silently near them.

Odeen rose, a new Odeen who knew exactly what was happening. Imperiously he ordered them away with an angry gesture—and they left. Silently. Without objection.

Dua stirred.

Tritt said, "Is she all right, Odeen?"

"Quiet, Tritt," said Odeen.

"Dua?"
"Odeen?" She stirred, spoke in a whisper. "I thought I had passed on."

"Not yet, Dua. Not yet. But first you must eat and rest."

"Is Tritt here, too?"

"Here I am, Dua," said Tritt.

"Don't try to bring me back," said Dua. "It's over. I've done what I wanted to do. All Pump action in the other-Universe will stop soon, I'm sure—making useless our end of the Pump. The Hard Ones will continue to need Soft Ones and they will take care of you two—or at least the children."

Odeen said nothing. He kept Tritt, too, from speaking. He let the radiation pour slowly into Dua. He stopped at times to let her rest a bit, then started again.

She began to mutter, "Enough. Enough." Her substance was writhing more strongly.

Still he fed her.

Finally he spoke. "Dua, you were wrong. We are not machines. I

know exactly what we are. I would have come to you sooner if I had found out earlier, but I didn't know till Losten begged me to think. And I did—very hard."

Dua moaned and Odeen stopped for a while.

He said, "Listen, Dua. There *is* a single species of life. The Hard Ones *are* the only living things in the world. You gathered that, and so far you were right. But that doesn't mean the Soft Ones aren't alive—it merely means they are part of the same single species. The Soft Ones are the immature forms of the Hard Ones. We are first children as Soft Ones, then adults as Soft Ones, then Hard Ones. Do you understand?"

Tritt muttered in soft confusion, "What? What?"

Odeen said, "Not now, Tritt. Not now. You'll understand, too, but this is for Dua." He kept watching Dua, who was gaining opalescence.

He said, "Listen, Dua, whenever we melt, whenever the triad melts, we become a Hard One. The Hard One is three-in-one, which is why he is hard. During the time of unconsciousness in melting we are a Hard One. But it is only temporary and we can never remember the period afterward. We can never stay a Hard One long—we must come back. But all through our life we keep developing, with certain key stages marking off our growth. Each baby born marks a key stage. With the birth of the third, the Emotional, there comes the possibility of the final stage, where the Rational's mind by itself, without

the other two, can remember those flashes of Hard One existence. Then, and only then, can he guide a perfect melt that will form the Hard One forever, so that the triad can live a new and unified life of learning and intellect. I told you that passing on was like being born again. I was groping then for something I did not quite understand—but now I know."

Dua was looking at him, trying to smile. She asked, "How can you pretend to believe that, Odeen? If that were so, wouldn't the Hard Ones have told you long ago—told all of us?"

"They couldn't, Dua. There was a time, long ages ago, when melting was just a putting together of the atoms of bodies. But evolution slowly developed minds. Listen to me, Dua. Melting is a putting together of the minds, too, and that's a much harder, a much more delicate process. To put them together properly and permanently, just so, the Rational must reach a certain pitch in development. That pitch is reached when he finds out for himself what it's all about—when his mind is finally keen enough to remember what has happened in all those temporary unions during melting. If the Rational were told, that development would be aborted and the time of the perfect melt could not be determined. The Hard One would form imperfectly. When Losten pleaded with me to think he was taking a great chance. Even that may have been—I hope not what I'm thinking. For its especially true in our case, Dua. For many generations, the Hard Ones

have been combining triads with great care to form particularly advanced Hard Ones and our triad was the best they'd ever obtained. Especially you, Dua. Especially you. Losten was once the Rational of the triad whose baby-mid you were. He knew you. He brought you to Tritt and me."

Dua sat up. Her voice was almost normal. "Odeen—are you making all this up to soothe me?"

Tritt broke in. "No, Dua. I feel it, too. I feel it, too. I don't know what exactly—but I feel it."

"He does, Dua," said Odeen. "You will, too. Aren't you beginning to recall being a Hard One during our melt? Don't you want to melt now? One last time?"

He lifted her. There was a feverishness about her and, though she struggled a bit, she was thinning.

"If what you say is true, Odeen," she gasped. "If we are to be a Hard One—then it seems to me you are saying we'll be an *important* one. Is that so?"

"The most important. The best who was ever formed. I mean that. Tritt; it's not goodbye. We'll be together as we always wanted to be. Dua, too. You, too, Dua."

Dua said. "Then we can make Estwald understand the Pump can't continue. We'll force—"

The melting was beginning. One by one the Hard Ones were entering again at the crucial moment. Odeen saw them imperfectly, for he was beginning to melt into Dua.

It was not like the other times. He was aware of no sharp ecstasy—just a smooth, cool, utterly peaceful movement. He could feel

himself become partly Dua and all the world seemed pouring into his/her sharpening senses. The Positron Pumps were still going—he/she could tell—why were they still going?

He was Tritt, too, and a keen sense of bitter loss filled his/her/his mind.

Oh, my babies. . .

He cried out, uttered one last cry under the consciousness of Odeen, except that somehow it was the cry of Dua. "No, we can't stop Estwald. *We* are Estwald. *We*—"

The cry that was Dua's and yet not Dua's stopped and there was no longer any Dua—nor would there ever be Dua again. Or Odeen. Or Tritt.

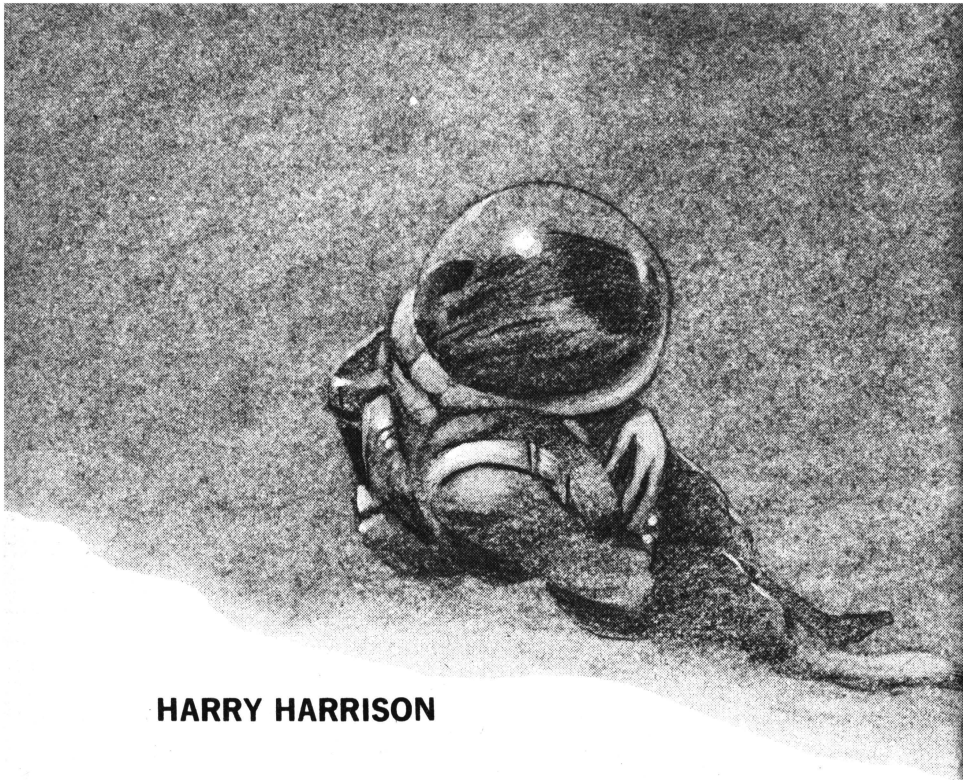
7abc

Estwald stepped forth and said sadly to the waiting Hard Ones by way of vibrating airwaves, "I am permanently with you now and there is much to do—"

TO BE CONCLUDED

The first installment of The Gods Themselves appears in the March-April issue of GALAXY, now on sale at your news store. The third and concluding installment will appear in the May-June issue of GALAXY, which will go on sale March 28. The reasons for dividing the novel in such fashion are given in the GALAXY issue containing the first installment.

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HARRY HARRISON

*The Rat would be home safe—
if yesterday he had not died!*

I
HAVE you ever been trapped in St. Paul's Cathedral in the year 1807 A.D., alone and welded to a steel post and soon to vanish with the world outside—which had already become nonexistent? Not many people can answer yes to that question—but I can. I can't

really say that I enjoy the distinction. I must further admit that I had never been happier to see my wife.

"Angelina, truly named," I said as, light as a falling leaf, she drifted down to the floor. "You descend from above to save me."

She opened the faceplate of her spacesuit wider so she could kiss me

THE STAINLESS STEEL RAT'S RETURN



Spangham

through the opening, then took an atomic lance from her belt and began to cut away my chains. "Now tell me what all this time-travel nonsense is about. And talk fast. We have only seven minutes—at least that is what Coypu said."

"What else did he tell you?" I asked, wondering just how much she knew.

"Stop being mysterious with me, Slippery Jim diGriz! I've had enough of that with Coypu."

I jumped back hastily as she waved the atomic lance under my chin. Then I beat out the fire she had started on my garments. An angry Angelina can be quite dangerous.

"My love," I said emotionally,

attempting to embrace her while keeping an eye on the lance at the same time. "I conceal nothing from you—nothing! I know better. It is just that my brain is tied in knots and I want to know where your knowledge leaves off before I continue with the complete story."

"You know perfectly well that I talked to you last on the phone. Big rush, you said, top priority, get over fast you shouted—then rang off. So I rushed to Copyu's lab. Everyone was running around playing with the machinery and too busy to tell me anything. Back in time, they shouted when I asked where you were. Nothing else. And that horrid Inskipp was no better. He said you vanished—just vanished out of his office—while he was reading the riot act to you. Apparently he found out about that little bit of money you are putting aside for a rainy decade or two. There was a lot of babble about your saving the world or the galaxy or something—I couldn't understand a word of it. And all of this went on for a *very* long time—until they could send me back here."

"Well, I did save the world" I said modestly. "Saved you, saved the Corps, saved the whole thing."

"I was right. You have been drinking."

"Not in entirely too long a time," I muttered petulantly. "If you want to know the truth you all vanished, *poof*, just like that. Coypu was the

last one to go so he can tell you about it. The Corps, everyone, they were never born, never existed except in my memory—"

"My memory is slightly different."

"It would be. Since through my efforts He's evil plan was foiled—"

"*His* not *he's*. All that drinking has affected your speech."

"*He* is his name—and I haven't had a drop in hours. Can you possibly listen without interrupting? This story is complicated enough in any case—"

"Complicated and possibly alcoholically inspired."

I GROANED. Then I kissed her, at length and more warmly this time, a distraction we both enjoyed. This softened her a bit so I rushed on before she remembered that she was supposed to be angry at me.

"A time attack was launched against the Special Corps, and Professor Coypu whisked me back in time to foil the nefarious scheme. I did all right in nineteen seventy-five but He got away, went back to whenever he came from, then set up an elaborate trap here in eighteen hundred and seven to trap me. Which he did. But his plans didn't work completely because I managed to change the setting on the time helix so he was sent to a different time from where he had intended to go. This must have defeated his plans—since you

managed to get here to rescue me.”

“Oh, darling, how wonderful of you. I knew you could save the world if you really tried.”

Mercurial, I guess, is the word for my Angelina. She kissed me with what can only be described as true passion and I, clanking my lengths of chain, got my arms around her in happy response. But she squawked and straight-armed me. I reeled back, choking.

“The time!” She looked at her watch and gasped. “You made me forget. There is less than a minute left. Where is the time helix?”

“Here.” Hugging my still painful midriff I showed her the machine.

“And the controls?”

“These.”

“How ugly. Where’s readout?”

“These dials.”

“This is the setting we must use, down to the thirteenth decimal position, Coypu said—he was most insistent about that.”

I played the keys like a mad pianist and sweated. The dials spun and hesitated, then gyrated wildly.

“Thirty seconds,” Angelina said sweetly to encourage me.

“There!” I gasped as she announced ten seconds. I kicked in the timer and threw the master switch. The time helix glowed greenly at us as we rushed to its protruding end.

“Stay close and hug me as hard as you can,” I said. “The time field has a surface effect so we must stay close—”

She responded with pleasure.

“I only wish I weren’t wearing this silly spacesuit,” she whispered, nibbling my ear. “It would be so much more fun.”

“It might be, but it might also be a little embarrassing when we arrived back at the Special Corps in that condition.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’re not going back yet.”

I felt a sudden stab of anxiety just below my sternum.

“What do you mean? Where are we going?”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t know. All Coypu said was that the hop would be about twenty thousand years into the future, to the moment just before this planet is to be destroyed.”

“He and his mad mob again,” I wailed. “You’ve just sent us off to tackle an entire planetary insane asylum—where everyone is against us!”

Everything froze as the time helix actuated and I was whipped into time with a pained expression on my face. That expression lasted 20,000 years, which was exactly how it felt.

BLAM! It was like falling into a steam bath—and falling was the right word. Hot clouds of vapor rushed past us and the invisible surface could be ten meters or ten miles below us.

“Switch on your grav-chute,” I shouted. “Mine’s back in the

nonexistent 'nineteenth century."

Perhaps I shouldn't have shouted. Angelina turned the thing on at full lift and slithered up out of my fond embrace like an oiled eel. I clutched madly and managed to grab one of her feet with both hands—whereupon the boot part of the one-piece spacesuit promptly came off her foot.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," she called down to me. "I agree with you completely," I answered through clamped and grating teeth.

The suit stretched and stretched until the leg was twice its normal length and I bobbed up and on down as though on the end of a rubber band. I took a quick look down, but only fog was visible below. Spacesuit fabric is tough, but it was never designed to take the strain I was putting on Angelina's. Something had to be done.

"Cut your lift," I called out and Angelina responded instantly.

We were in free fall and as soon as the tension was relieved the leg fabric contracted and snapped me back up to Angelina's waiting arms.

"Yum," I said.

She looked down and shrieked and hit the grav-chute power again. This time I wasn't ready and I slipped right down and out of her embrace and was falling toward the solid looking landscape that had suddenly appeared below.

In the small fraction of a second

left to me I did what little I could—twisting in the air, spreading my arms and legs wide, trying to land square on my back. I had almost succeeded when I hit.

Everything went black. I was sure I was dead. Before the darkness overwhelmed my brain my last thought flashed before me—not only did I not regret anything I had ever done but there were a few things I wished I had done more often.

I could not have been unconscious more than a few instants. Foul-tasting mud filled my mouth and I spluttered it out, rubbed more of it from my eyes and looked around. I was floating in a sea of mud and water from which large bubbles rose and broke with slow plops. They stank. Sickly looking reeds and water plants grew on all sides.

"Alive!" I shouted, "I am alive." I had struck flat out on the syrupy surface and felt some aches and bruises, but nothing seemed to be broken.

"It looks very nasty down there," Angelina said, hovering a few feet above my head.

"It's just as nasty as it looks so, if you don't mind, I would like to get out of it. Can you sort of drop down so I can grab your ankles which will permit you to drag me out with a wet sucking sound?"

A LARGE, wet sucking sound it was as the decaying quag-

mire fought to hold onto me, parting with me only reluctantly and with a slobbering sigh. I hung from my love's ankles as we drifted over an apparently endless swamp which vanished in the fog in all directions.

"There—over to the right," I called out. "Looks like a channel with running water. I think a wash and brush-up is in order."

"Since I am upwind of you I couldn't agree more."

The current was moving slowly, but still moving; I could tell by a tree-trunk that drifted by. Into the middle of the sluggish stream reached a golden sandbar that seemed made for us. I dropped as Angelina came low and even before she had settled down herself I was out of my noisome garb and scrubbing the muck off in the water. When I bobbed up, spluttering, I saw that she had peeled out of her spacesuit and was combing out her long hair, which happened to be blond at the moment. Very lovely, and I was thinking the most romantic thoughts when fierce fire pierced my gluteus maximus and I shot straight up out of the water, yiping like a dog whose tail has been caught in the door. As attractive and feminine as she was, Angelina was still Angelina and the comb vanished to be replaced by a gun and, almost before I touched the sand, she had fired a single, precisely aimed shot.

While she was applying a

bandage to the double row of tooth-marks in my derriere I looked at the fish, somewhat blown apart but still twitching, that had mistaken me for lunch. Its gaping mouth had more teeth than a dental supply house and there was a definitely evil look in its rapidly clouding eye. Grabbing it by the tail to evade its still gnashing jaws, I threw it far out into the water. This started a tremendous flurry of action under the surface and from the size of some of the things that leaped out and smacked back down I saw that I had been attacked by one of the smaller ones.

"Twenty thousand years has done no good at all to this planet," I said.

"Finish rinsing off that mud and I'll stand guard. Then we'll have some lunch."

Ever the practical woman.

While I scrubbed she shot up the piscatorial predators who came after me, including one large fish with fat flanks and rudimentary legs that waddled out of the water in an attempt to have me for lunch. We had it—instead. The flanks concealed some fine thick filets that roasted well over a low-set heat projector. Angelina had had the foresight to bring a flask of my favorite wine and the meal became a memorable one. I sighed, eructated and wiped my lips with satisfaction.

"You have saved my life more than once in the last twenty thou-

sand years," I said. "So I no longer am brimful of anger for being whisked to this steam-bath world rather than back to the Corps. But can you at least tell me what happened and what Coypu told you?"

"He tends to mumble a good deal, but I got the gist of it. He has been working on his time-tracker or whatever he calls it and followed your jumps through time as well as those of someone he referred to as the enemy—the one you call He. The enemy did something with time, created a probability loop that lasted about five years, then terminated. He left this collapsing loop—and you didn't. That's why Coypu sent me back to the minutes just before it ended—to bring you out. He gave me the setting for the time helix that would enable us to follow He to this time. I asked him what we were supposed to do here but he kept muttering, *Paradox, paradox* . . . and wouldn't tell me. Do you have any idea of what is supposed to happen."

"Simple enough. Find He and kill him. That should put paid to the entire operation. I've had two tries at him—shooting once and using thermite bombs the second time—and haven't succeeded. Maybe this will be lucky three."

"Perhaps you ought to let me take care of him," Angelina offered kindly.

"A fine idea. We'll blast him together. I have had just about

enough of this temporal paper chase."

"How do we find him?"

"Simplicity itself, if you have a time-energy detector with you." She had one through Coypu's foresight and passed it over. "A simple flick of this switch and the moving needle points to our man."

The switch flicked but did nothing more than release a little condensed water that ran out into my palm.

"It doesn't seem to be working," Angelina said, smiling sweetly.

"Either that or He is not using the time helix at this particular moment." I rummaged in my equipment. "I had to leave my spacesuit and some other things back in eighteen-oh-seven, but Slippery Jim is never without his snooper."

I WAS proud of the gadget. I had designed it myself and it was one of the few things He hadn't taken from me. Rugged, it could resist almost anything except being dropped into molten metal. Compact, no bigger than my hand. And it could detect the weakest flickerings of radiation across a tremendous range of frequencies. I turned it on and ran my fingers over the familiar controls.

"Most interesting," I said and tried the radio frequencies.

"If you don't enlighten me quickly I'll never save your life again."

"You have to because you love me with an undying passion. I get two sources, one weak and very distant. The other can't be too far and is putting out on a number of frequencies, including atomic radiation and energy transmission, as well as a lot of radio. And something of more pressing urgency. Get out the sunburn cream—solar ultraviolet radiation is right up at the top of the scale. You can bet I've been well cooked already."

We creamed and, despite the heat, put on enough clothing to shield us from the invisible radiation that was pouring out of the clouded sky.

"Strange things have happened to the Earth," I said. "The radiation, this soggy climate, the wild-life in this river. I wonder—"

"I don't. After completing the mission you can do your paleogeologic research. Let's kill He first."

"Spoken like a pro. I hope you don't mind if I rig a harness so we can share the benefit of the grav-chute equally this time?"

"Sounds like fun," she said, loosening the straps.

The airborne Siamese twin arrangement lifted and took us low over the sea of gunk in the direction of all the activity. Mud and swamp continued for a boringly long time and I was beginning to chafe in the straps and worry about the power supply when the higher land finally appeared. First some rocks sticking out of the

water, then sheer cliffs greeted us. It took more juice to lift us up the side of these and the indicator on the power pack dropped quickly.

"We are going to have to walk soon," I said, "which is at least better than swimming."

"Not if the land animals match those in the water."

Ever optimistic my Angelina. As I was phrasing a witty and scathing reply there was a flash of light from the rampart of rocks ahead, followed instantly by an intense pain in my leg.

"I've been shot!" I shouted, more in surprise than pain, reaching for the grav-chute controls and finding that Angelina had already killed the power.

We dropped toward a wicked jumble of rocks, slowing and stopping only at the last minute. I hopped on one leg to the shelter of an overhanging slab and was thinking of digging out my medikit when Angelina sprayed antiseptic on the wound, tore half of my pants leg away, injected instant painkiller in my thigh and probed the gory opening. She was ahead of me with everything and I didn't mind in the slightest.

"A neat penetrating wound," she announced, spraying on surgifoam, "Should heal quickly, no problem. Keep your weight off it. Now I have to kill whoever did it."

ALL the drugs had slowed me down and before I could

answer she had her gun in her hand and had faded silently into the rocky landscape. There is nothing like having a loving and tender wife who is a cool and accomplished killer. Maybe I wore the pants in the family, but we both wore guns.

Not too long after this came the sound of explosions, a great clattering in the rocks above and, soon after that, some hoarse screams that soon ended in silence. It is a tribute to Angelina's prowess that I never for a second was concerned about her safety. In fact, I dozed off under the assault of the drugs coursing through my bloodstream and awoke only when I was aware of tugging on the grav-chute harness. I yawned and blinked at her as she buckled in beside me.

"Am I allowed to ask what happened?" I said.

She frowned. "Just one man up there. I couldn't find any others. I saw a farm building of sorts, some machinery, crops growing. I must be slipping. I knocked him out, then could not bring myself to shoot him while he was lying there unconscious."

I kissed her as we rose.

"A conscience, my sweet. Some of us are born with them, yours was surgically implanted. The results are the same."

"I'm not really sure I like it. There was a certain freedom in the old days."

"We all have to be civilized some time."

She sighed and nodded, then gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

"I suppose you are right. But it would have been so satisfying to blow him into small pieces."

We were over the last of the tumbled scree now and ascending a small cliff. We came to a plateau, on which was a low building made of stones cemented together. The door was open and I hobbled through it, leaning on Angelina's shoulder. Dim light through the small windows revealed a large and cluttered room with two bunks against the far wall. On one of them lay a bound man twisting and turning, mumbling and growling into a gag that sealed his mouth.

"You get into the other bed," Angelina told me, "while I see if I can get any intelligence out of this awful creature."

I had actually taken the first steps toward the bunk before reason penetrated my soggy thoughts and I stopped dead.

"Beds. Two of them? There must be someone else around the place."

Whatever answer was on her lips was never spoken because a man appeared in the doorway behind us, shouting noisily and firing an even noisier weapon.

II

HE WAS shouting mainly because the weapon was blown from his hands even as he

triggered it, and an instant later he was blown back out of the doorway. I saw all this as I dived and rolled. I had my gun out just as Angelina was putting hers away.

"Now that is more like it," she said, apparently addressing the silent pair of boots in the doorway. "Civilized conscience or no, I find that shooting in self-defense still comes easily. I saw this one out among the rocks, stalking us as we came in, but I never had a clear shot. Everything should be quiet now. I'll make some warm soup and you take a nice nap—"

"No." I doubt if a firmer *no* had ever been spoken. I popped out a pair of stimtabs and chewed them as I continued my monologue in the same tone of voice. "There is a certain retrogressive pleasure in being cared for and treated like an idiot child, but I think I have had enough of it. I have tackled He before this and chased him out of two of his lairs and I intend now to finish him off. I know his ways. I'm in charge of this expedition. You will follow, not lead. And you will obey orders."

"Yes, sir," she answered with lowered eyelids and bowed head. Did this cover a mocking smile? I did not care. Me boss.

"Me boss." It sounded even better said aloud in a firm and declaratory tone.

"Yes, boss," she said and giggled prettily while the man on the bed writhed and chomped and

the boots in the doorway were silent.

We went to work. Our prisoner slavered noisily in an unknown tongue when I took out the gag. He tried to bite my fingers when I restored it. A rough-looking radio on a shelf produced only grating broadcasts in the same alien language when I turned it on. Angelina's outdoor investigations were far more productive than mine and she pulled up by the door in an impossibly ugly conveyance that looked like a scratched, purple, plastic bathtub slung between four sets of wheels. It burred and hissed at me when I hobbled up to examine it.

"Very simple to operate," Angelina said, showing off her technical skill. "There is only one switch and that turns it on. And two handles, one for the bank of wheels on each side. Forward to speed them up, back to brake them—"

"And neutral in the middle," I said to demonstrate *my* technical skill as well as the fact that I was a male chauvinist pig and this was my show. "And this lead-covered lump in the rear must be a nuclear generator. Unshield a chunk of radioactive material, heat up the surrounding liquid—a heat-exchanger here, secondary liquid to turn this electric generator, motors in each wheel, ugly and crude but practical. Where do we go in it?"

She pointed. "There seems to be

a road or trail of sorts going off through that cultivated field there. And unless memory fails—I *know* you will be quick to correct me—that seems to be the direction indicated by the radio signals you detected earlier.”

A mild blow struck for femlib and I ignored it. Particularly since she was right as the snooper soon confirmed.

“Off we go then,” I said, in command once again.

“Going to kill the prisoner?” she asked hopefully.

“Thank you, no. But I’ll take his clothes, since mine have reached the old rag stage. If we break up the radio he’ll have a hard job telling anyone we’re coming. He’ll chew through his gag and ropes in a couple of hours so we can leave the burial arrangements of his associate to him. We will load our gear and be on our way.”

The firmness of my authority was dimmed slightly by the rapid, red-blooming growth of my sunburn. While Angelina stomped the radio I put on more cream. A few minutes later we were bumping along the worn trail that twisted across the high plateau.

THE fog and haze were less at this altitude—not that there was anything more to see. The rough landscape was slashed with gullies that carried away the water from the frequent rainstorms, which also removed what little

topsoil still remained in the area. Tough-looking plants clung to the rocks for protection and scant shelter. Occasionally we passed branching side trails but the direction finder on the snooper kept us on the right track. The hard bucket seats were hideously uncomfortable and I welcomed the gathering darkness of dusk—though of course I didn’t say this aloud—and turned off behind a jumbled hill of great rocks for the night.

In the morning I was stiff but feeling more fit. The drugs had whipped my cells into a frenzy of growth that had nearly healed my various wounds and given me a raging appetite. We breakfasted from the meager supplies that Angelina had brought, eked out by some coarse bread and dried meat liberated from the homicidal farmers. Angelina took the wheel and I rode shotgun, not liking the look of the decomposing landscape at all. The track now wandered down from the hills as the highlands turned into a vertical escarpment of rock. Then there were more swamps and some very nasty looking jungle into which the road dipped. Creepers hung low enough to brush our heads, and the soggy trees touched overhead. The air became more humid and hotter.

“I don’t like this place,” Angelina said, steering around a boggy spot that slopped across the track.

"I like it even less," I said, gun in hand and a clip of explosive cartridges in the butt. "If the wildlife here is anything like that in the river we may have some fun and games in store."

I looked ahead, behind, right and left and wished my eyeballs grew on stalks. I saw countless suspicious dark shapes among the trees and heard occasional heavy crashings, but nothing appeared to threaten us. Nothing that I could see. Of course the one spot I wasn't watching was the surface of the road and that is where the imminent danger lay.

"That tree has fallen right across the road," Angelina said. "Just bump over it—"

"I wouldn't," I said, just a little too late as our wheels trundled over the green trunk that lay across the track and vanished into the jungle on both sides.

Our center wheels were on it when it shuddered and heaved upward in a great loop. The vehicle turned over. Angelina and I were hurled clear, but not clear enough. I hit the ground, tucked my head in, rolled and came up with the gun ready. A good thing, too. The fallen pseudo-tree was writhing nicely, while out of the foliage across the track appeared the front end of the thing.

A snake. With a head as big as a barrel, gaping mouth, flicking tongue, beady eyes and a hiss like a boiler about to explode. Right

under those wide-spread jaws was Angelina, sitting up and shaking her head dizzily and totally unaware of what was happening. There was time for one shot and I wanted it to be a good one. As that demonic head came down I held my wrist with my left hand to steady the gun and squeezed off a round right into the thing's mouth. Its head was blown off.

That should have been the end of it—but a gigantic spasm went through the entire length of that muscular body. Before I could get out of the way a thrashing loop struck me and hurled me into the trees. This time there was no fancy roll and dive but a simple splintery bang as I crashed through the branches and one got me on the side of the head. A nice white explosion of pain and that was that.

TIME passed that I was not aware of. The ache in my head drew me back to reluctant consciousness and the discovery of a new and sharper pain in my leg. I opened a bleary eye and saw something small and brown with a lot of claws and teeth that was tearing an opening in my pants leg in order to make lunch out of my thigh. I kicked it with my boot. It growled and screeched and showed me all its teeth but reluctantly slipped away into the foliage when I attempted another weak kick in its direction.

Weak was the word for everything I felt. It took me some time to do more than lie there and gasp and try to remember what had happened. The road, the snake, the wreck . . .

"Angelina!" I shouted hoarsely and struggled to my feet, ignoring the waves of pain that washed through me. "Angelina—"

There was no answer. I pushed through the shrubbery to witness a singularly nasty sight. A churning row of brown animals, relatives of the one who had nibbled me, was working on the carcass of the snake and had already reduced great sections to a neatly polished rib cage. And my gun was gone. I turned back and searched where I had fallen but it was not there. Something was wrong, seriously wrong, and the shrill voice of panic was beginning to keen in the back of my head.

As long as I stayed clear of them the carrion eaters ignored me. I made a wide loop to cross the road. The car was gone—and so was Angelina.

The situation required cogent thought, impossible with the aches and pains that were crippling me. And I had to do something about the insects that were buzzing about the wound in my head. My medikit was still in its pocket and that was next in the order of business. In a few minutes I was soothed, depained, stimulated and ready for action. But where was the action?

Wherever the car was, my clicking thoughts responded. Its tracks were clear enough in the muddy ground—which also revealed the mystery of Angelina's disappearance. I found at least two sets of large, ugly, masculine footprints around the churned area where the vehicle had been righted—as well as another set of car tracks. Either we had been followed or a chance bunch of tourists had arrived on the scene after the snake incident. Spatters of mud and bent grass showed that both cars had carried on in the original direction we had been going. I went that way myself at a ground-eating trot, trying not to think about what might have happened to Angelina.

The trot didn't last long. Fatigue and heat slowed me to a shambling walk. A stimtab took care of one and I just sweated out the other. The tracks were clear and I followed. In less than an hour the road had wound its way out of the jungle and into some dry hills. Coming around a turn I had a quick glimpse of one of the cars pulled up ahead and I drew back quickly.

A plan was needed. My gun had vanished so shooting down Angelina's kidnapers was out of the question. The few remaining devices in my clothing were non-lethal, though I did have a wrist holder full of grenades that Angelina had given me. They were the answer.

I selected a handful of sleepgas bombs to drop the kidnapers before they could shoot me and took a couple of explosive grenades in the other hand just in case any of the enemy were not near Angelina and needed more dramatic and permanent disposal.

Armed and ready, I crept forward from rock to rock, took a deep breath and jumped into the clearing where both vehicles waited.

And caught a wooden club in the side of my head.

I WAS out long enough for my wrists and ankles to be tied and my weapons to be stripped from me. For this disaster I can blame only myself and my inattention. Fatigue and stimulants may have contributed, but my own stupidity had been the cause. I cursed myself under my breath—which did no good at all—as I was dragged across the ground and dumped down beside Angelina.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Of course. And in far better shape than you are.”

Which was true. Her clothing was torn and I saw bruises. She had been knocked around. Someone was going to pay and pay well for that. I could hear my teeth grating together. And she was tied just as I was.

“They thought you were dead,” she said. “And so did I.” Her words held a wealth of unsaid feeling and I tried a smile. It came

on a little more twisted than I like. She went on: “I don’t know how long we lay there—I was unconscious, too. When I came to I was like this and they had taken the guns and everything and were loading it all into the cars. Then we left. I could do nothing to stop them. All they speak is that same horrible language.”

They looked as horrible as their language sounded, all scruffy clothing and greasy leather straps, bushels of matted dirty hair and beard. I had an entirely unnecessary closer look at one of them when he came over and twisted my head to one side and the other while he compared my crunched features with a good photograph of me. I snapped my teeth at the filthy fingers but he pulled them away in time. These must be He’s men—the photo proved that—though I had no idea where it came from. Taken during one of our tangles in time no doubt and treasured by his crew ever since. At this point I noticed the ugliest and smelliest of the lot ogling Angelina. I snapped at his ankle and was kicked aside for my pains.

Angelina is a very direct-minded girl. When she knows what she wants she gets it, no matter what. Now she saw the only way we could get out of this mess and she used it. Woman’s wiles. With no hint of disgust at the ugly brute she began to openly lavish her attention upon him. She could not speak his

language but the language she did speak was as old as mankind. Turning away from me she smiled at the hairy beast and gave a twist of her head to call him over. Her shoulders were back, her charming figure prominent, hips tilted coyly.

Of course it worked. There was a bit of lively discussion with the other two, but Hairiest knocked one of them down and that was that. They looked on with burning jealousy as he stalked over to her. She smiled her warmest and held out her slim, bound wrists.

What man could resist that unspoken appeal? Certainly not this shambling hulk. He cut the thongs on her wrists and put his knife away as she bent to free her ankles. When he hauled her to her feet she arose eagerly. He locked her in a bearlike embrace, bending his face to hers.

I could have told him that he would have been safer trying to kiss a sabertooth tiger but I did not. What happened next only I could see because the jealous watchers were blocked from sight by the bulk of his body. Who would imagine that those delicate fingers could shape themselves into that hard a point, that the thin wrist could propel the hand so deep into bushy's gut? Lovely. He bent to her and, with only a gentle sigh, kept bending. For a moment she supported his weight—then stepped back and screamed as he folded to the ground.

A picture of feminine innocence, hands to cheeks, eyes staring, shrieking at the strange occurrence of a strong man collapsing at her feet. Of course the other two ran over, but their faces showed the beginnings of cold suspicion. The first one carried my gun.

ANGELINA took care of him. As soon as he was close enough she let fly with bushy's knife, which she had appropriated before she dropped him. I did not see where it hit because the third man was passing me and I had drawn my legs back in hopes that he would. He did. I kicked out, got him below the knees and he went down. Even as he fell I was jack-knifing forward and before he could get up again I let him have it with both boots in the side of the head. And a second time just because I was feeling nasty.

That was that. Angelina removed the knife from her unmoving target, wiped it on his clothing, then came to free me.

"Will you kill the ones who are still twitching?" she asked demurely.

"I should, but cold-blooded revenge is not for me. They are what they are and I suppose that is penalty enough. I think if we took all their supplies and wrecked their wagon it would be revenge enough. You were wonderful."

"Of course. That was why you married me." She kissed me

quickly because she had to turn an instant later to land her heel on the forehead of bushy, who was beginning to twitch. He slept on. We packed and left.

Our goal was not too far away. A few hours later we felt a stirring of the air that grew stronger as we continued down the track through the hills. A sudden turn brought us to the brink of a valley with a sharp drop and I kicked the vehicle into a swirling spin and darted it back out of sight again.

"Did you see that?" I asked.

"I certainly did," Angelina replied as we slipped forward on our bellies and looked around the turn.

The wind was stronger here, pouring up the wide valley from some invisible source below. The air was cooler, too, and though the ever-present clouds hung above, no fog obscured the view in the valley. Across from us the hill rose, turning to a solid cliff that reared up vertically, glossy black stone. Erosion had carved it into a fantasy of towers and turrets—men had carved these further into a castle city that covered the mountaintop.

There were windows and doorways, flags and pennants, stairs and buttresses. The flags were bright red and inscribed with black characters. Some of the towers had been painted crimson as well and this, with the mad frenzy of the construction, meant only one thing.

"It's not logical, I know," Angelina said. "But that place sends a

definite shiver down my spine. It seems—hard to describe—perhaps insane is the best word."

"The absolute best. Which means that since this is the right world and time, a place that looks like that must be where He is."

"How do we get to him?"

"A very good question," I said in lieu of an intelligent answer. How *did* we get into this kooky-castle? I scratched my head and rubbed my jaw but these infallible aids to thought did not work this time. There was a slight movement at the edge of my vision. I looked and grabbed for my gun—and froze the motion halfway.

"Don't make any sudden motions, particularly in the direction of your weapon," I told Angelina in a quiet voice. "Turn around slowly."

WE BOTH turned slowly, doing nothing that might produce anxiety in the trigger fingers of the dozen or so men who had appeared silently behind us and stood with leveled and firmly aimed weapons.

"Get ready to dive forward when I do," I said and turned back to see another four men who had appeared just as silently in the valley in front of us. "Belay that last command and smile sweetly and surrender. We'll chop them up after we get in among them."

This last I meant mostly as a morale booster. Unlike the wild-

eyed men from whom we had taken our multiwheeled transportation, this lot was cool and able. These men were dressed alike in gray one-piece plastic outfits equipped with hoods. Their weapons were as long as rifles, gape-orificed and lethal looking. We trotted forward obediently when one of them waved that instruction in our direction. Another member of the closing circle stepped closer to look us over, but not close enough for anyone who wasn't suicide prone to attempt to seize his weapon.

"*Stragitzkruml?*" he said, then continued: "*Fidlykreepi? Atten-toittenpotentaten?*"

When we made no response to these incomprehensible requests he turned to a bulky man with a red beard who seemed to be in charge.

"*Ili ne parolas konantajn lingvojn,*" he said in clearly accented Esperanto.

"Well that's more like it," I answered in the same tongue. "Might I ask why you gentlemen find it necessary to pull guns on simple travelers like ourselves?"

"Who are you?" Redbeard asked, coming forward.

"I might ask the same of you."

"I am pointing the guns," he answered coldly.

"A well made point and I bow to your logic. We are tourists from the land across the sea—" He interrupted with a short and nasty word.

"That is impossible as we both

know, since this is the only land mass on this planet. The truth now."

We both hadn't known, though we did now. A single continent? What had happened to Mother Earth during those twenty millennia? Lying had been no good so perhaps the truth might work. It did on occasion.

"Would you believe me if I told you we were time-travelers?"

THIS hit the target, all right. He looked startled and there was a stir of movement among the men who had been close enough to hear what I had said. Redbeard glared them into silence before he spoke again.

"What is your connection with He and those creatures in his city up there?"

A lot depended upon my answer. Truth had worked once and it might turn the trick again. And he had said *creatures*—a giveaway. I could not believe this calm and disciplined force could be associated with the enemy.

"I have come to kill He and wipe out his operation."

This really did produce the right effect. Some of the men even lowered their guns before being growled back into line. Redbeard uttered a command and one of the men hurried away. We remained in silence until he returned with a green metal cube about the size

of his head that he handed to the commander. It must have been hollow because he carried it easily. Redbeard held it up.

"We have over a hundred of these. They have been floating down out of the sky for the past month and all of them are identical. A powerful radio source inside leads us to them—but we cannot cut or dissolve the metal. On the outside, on five faces of the cube, they are covered with lines of writing in what appear to be different languages and scripts. The ones we can translate all read the same way: 'Bring this to the time-travelers.' On the bottom of the cube are two lines of writing that we cannot read. Can you?"

He slowly extended the cube toward me and I took it just as gingerly, while every gun was trained on me. The metal looked like collapsium, the incredibly tough stuff used for atomic rocket-tube liners. I carefully turned it bottom up and read the lines at a single glance before handing it back.

"I can read them." I said, and they were aware of the new tone in my voice. "The first line says that He and his people will all leave this period in time exactly two point thirty-seven days after my arrival here."

A murmur rose. Angelina beat Redbeard to the punch with the important question.

"What was in the second line?"

I tried a smile but it didn't seem much good.

"Oh, that. It says that the planet will be destroyed by atomic explosions as soon as they go."

III

THE tent was made of the same gray plastic as the clothes our captors wore and was a chilled refuge from the steambath atmosphere outside. A squat machine whirred in one corner, dehumidifying and cooling the air. Even cooler drinks had been produced and I drained and brooded over mine, trying to see a way out of this dilemma before the deadly deadline was reached. Though guns were still in evidence an unspoken truce was in effect—Redbeard decided to formalize it.

"I drink with you," he said. "I am Diyan."

It seemed very much like a ritual so I repeated the formula and introduced myself as did Angelina. After this the weapons vanished and we were all much more chummy. I sat down where I could benefit from the full breeze of the air-cooler and decided to ask some questions.

"Do you people have any weapons heavier than these handguns?"

"None that are available. The few we brought have been destroyed in battle with He's forces."

"Is this continent so big you

can't get more of them here quickly from your country?"

"The size of the continent is of no importance. Our space vessels are very small and everything must be brought from our home planet."

I blinked rapidly, feeling I was getting out my depth.

"You are not from Earth?" I asked.

"Our ancestors were, but we are all native born Martians."

"You wouldn't care to give me a few more facts, would you? The sound of confusion I keep hearing appears to be inside my own head."

I am sorry. I thought you knew. Here; let me fill your glass. The story really begins many thousands of years ago when a sudden change in solar radiation raised the temperature here on Earth. By sudden I mean a matter of centuries. As the climate changed and the ice caps melted, the continued existence of life on the surface of the planet was threatened. Coastlines were altered and immense areas of low-lying land inundated; great cities were drowned. This in itself might have been dealt with, had it not been for the seismic disturbances brought about by the shifting stresses on the Earth's surface as the poles were freed of their ice burden and the released water covered other areas. There were earthquakes and lava flows, sinking lands and the rising of new mountains. All quite terrible—we have seen the recordings many times in

our schools. An incredible international effort was launched to terrify the planet Mars—that is, make it suitable for human habitation. This involved the creation of an atmosphere there with a high carbon dioxide layer to trap the increased radiation of the sun, the transportation of ice mountains from the rings of Saturn, things like this. It was a noble ambition that in the end did succeed, but it bankrupted the nations of Earth who gave their all in this unbelievable effort. Eventually there was dissent and even warfare as weakened governments fell and greedy men fought for more than an equal share of space on the new-made world. Through all of this the waters continued to rise on Earth and the first Martian settlers struggled against the harsh rigors of a barely livable world to establish the settlements. In history these are known as the Deadly Years because so many people died—the figures are unbelievable. But in the end we survived and Mars is a green and comfortable world.

"Earth did not fare as well. Contact was lost between the planets and the survivors of the once teeming billions here fought a dreadful battle for survival. There are no written records of that period, thousands of years long, but the results are clear enough. This single large continent remained above the sea, as well as some island chains to mark earlier mountain ranges.

And madness rules mankind. When we were able we rebuilt the ancient spaceships and brought what help we could. Our help was not appreciated. The survivors still living on Earth kill strangers on sight and take great pleasure in it. And all men are strangers. The almost unshielded solar radiation here produced mutants of all kinds among all Earth's life forms. Most mutations died off quickly but the survivors are deadly to a universal degree. So we helped where we could—but really did very little. The Earthmen were a continuing danger to each other, but not to Mars. That is not until He united them some hundreds of years ago.”

“Has He really lived all that time?”

“It appears that He has. His mind is as bent as theirs but he can communicate with them. They follow him. They have actually worked together in building that city you have seen—building a society of sorts. He is certainly a genius, albeit a warped one. His people have factories going and a rudimentary technology. One of the first things they did was ask for more aid from Mars—and they would not believe us when we said that they were getting the maximum already. Their mad demands would have not bothered us had they not unearthed rockets armed with atomic bombs that could be directed at our planet. It was after the first of these arrived that this

expedition was organized. On Mars we survived by cooperating—there was no other way—so we are not a warlike people. But we have made weapons and will reluctantly use them to insure our own survival. He is the key to all the troubles and we must capture or kill him. Thousands are dead at home and radioactivity is increasing in the Martian atmosphere.”

“OUR aims are identical,” I told him. “He has launched a time attack against our people with equally disastrous results. You have summed up our retaliatory goals quite neatly.”

“How do we go about it?” Diyan asked eagerly.

“I’m not sure,” I answered gloomily.

“We have a little over ten standard hours left to operate in,” Angelina said precisely. Like all women she was a true pragmatist. While we wasted time nattering about the past she faced the fact that the decision would have to be made in the future and tackled that, the real problem. I yearned to demonstrate my affection for her but decided to wait for a more appropriate time, if more time did exist at all.

“An all-out attack,” I said. “We have weapons we can add to yours. Attack on all fronts, find a weak spot, concentrate our forces, blast through to victory. Do you have any large weapons left?”

"No."

"Well, we can get around that. How about crashlanding one of your spacers inside the castle up there and getting a fighting force behind their backs that way?"

"Our spacers were destroyed by saboteurs, suicidal ones. Others are coming from Mars but will arrive too late. We are not really very good at war and killing while they have always lived with it."

Gloom grew so thick in the air you could have cut chunks of it out.

"The grav-chute," Angelina said quietly so only I heard her.

"We will use the grav-chute," I said so loudly that all could hear. A good general depends on able staffwork. The complete plan was now clear, written in letters of fire before my eyes. "This is a go-for-broke operation. Angelina and I are going to drain the charges from all our unessential equipment to put a full charge into the grav-chute. Then we will rig a multiple harness for this. I'll do the exact computations later but I would guess that it will lift five or six people over those walls and inside before it burns out. Angelina and I are two, the rest will be your best people—"

"A woman—no, this is not work for a woman," Diyan protested. I patted his arm understandingly.

"Have no fear. Sweet and demure as she is, Angelina can outfight any ten men in this tent. And everyone is needed. Because the

troops outside will be launching a quite realistic attack that might break through—general at first, then concentrating on one flank. When the noise is at its highest the commando squad will lift over the opposite wall and bore from within. Now let's get things organized."

ANGELINA and I did all the groundwork. These peaceful Martian plowboys knew nothing about scientific slaughter and were only too happy to turn the responsibilities of leadership over to us. Once matters were under way I lay down for a quick sleep—I had been awake or clubbed unconscious something like two full days and 20,000 years and I was understandably tired. The three hours I grabbed were certainly not enough and I awoke chomping and blinking. I chewed a stimtab to make up the difference. It was dark outside the tent and still just as hot.

"Are we ready to roll?" I asked.

"Any minute now," Angelina said, cool and relaxed and showing no signs of her labors—she must have been at the stimtabs, too. "We have about four hours to dawn and we are going to need most of that time to get into position. The attack begins at first light."

"Do the guides know the way?"

"They should. They have been fighting in and around this position for almost a year."

This was the showdown. The men were all aware of it. There could be only one winner this day. Perhaps they weren't born fighters, but they were learning fast. If you are going to fight you fight to win. Diyan showed up with three men who carried a jury-rigged metal harness with the grav-chute built into the center of it.

"We are ready," he said.

"Everyone knows what he is to do?"

"Perfectly. We have already said our goodbyes and the first attack units have moved out."

"Then we'll get going, too."

Diyan led the way, though how he found it in that steam-heated darkness I have no idea. We stumbled behind him, sweating and cursing under the burden of the clumsy harness, and the less said about the following hours the better. Dawn found us collapsed under the far wall of the fortified city, the highest and apparently the strongest point. Our target. As it appeared out of the haze above us, black and grim, it did not look at all attractive. I squeezed Angelina's hand to show her I was fearless and to cheer her up. She squeezed mine back to show that she knew I was just as frightened as the rest of them.

"We'll do it, Jim," she said. "You know that."

"Oh, we'll do it, all right—the continuing existence of our particular hunk of the future proves that.

But it doesn't indicate how many are going to die today—or which of us will live into the foreseeable future."

"We're immortal," she said with such surety that I had to laugh. My morale soared to its usual egotistical heights and I kissed her soundly and well.

Explosions sounded suddenly in the distance, rumbling and rolling like thunder from the rock walls. The attack had begun. The clock was running and everything was timed from here on in. I helped everyone strap in and kept an eye on my watch at the same time. As our scheduled hop-off drew close I buckled in as well and touched the grav-chute controls.

"Brace yourselves," I said, watching the numbers flutter past. "And be ready to cut free when we hit at the other end."

I punched the button and with a metallic groan from the harness my little force of six rose to attack.

WE DRIFTED up the black face of the rock, sitting ducks for anyone with a good gun and a keen eye. The sensation was uncomfortable to say the least. I had to lift off gradually to keep our harness from buckling, but I speeded up as fast as I could until we were on maximum lift. A visible aura of heat began to radiate from the grav-chute as it struggled against all our dead weight. Its

failure now would be highly unpleasant.

Then deep-cut windows flashed by, happily unoccupied—the black stone changed to dark wall and the crenelated top of the parapet was ahead. I angled toward it and cut the power completely just before we reached the edge. Our acceleration carried us up and over in a high arc and after that events took place at an incredibly rapid pace.

Two guards were on the wall—both were surprised, angry, armed and about to fire. Angelina and I fired first. We were using the needle guns now in order to remain undetected for as long as possible. The guards crumpled in silence, their faces and necks suddenly bristly as pincushions. I hit the power button for the landing.

Landing? There was no courtyard or solid roof below. We were coming down on the domed and transparent cover of a large workshop, a canopy made of what appeared to be glass panels held in a tangled web of rusty metal braces. We looked at it, horrified, as we rushed toward it. We were just not going to stop in time.

It was lovely. Silent, secret attackers, flitting gray ghosts in the dawn we were not. Six pairs of boots hit at the same instant and about five thousand square meters of glass were kicked out. The supporting framework twanged and bent and some of the rusty supports snapped free. For one shuddering

instant I thought we were going to follow all the glass that was now crashing and clashing into the chamber below with a hideously loud cacophony. Then the grav-chute gave its all with one shuddering last blaze of energy, halting our forward motion.

Then it burst into flame.

“Grab the supports,” I shouted, tearing at the clamps that held the grav-chute to our harness. They resisted, searing my hand, but finally the chute dropped free. It fell straight down into the hall with its screaming occupants below, where it promptly exploded. I sighed and dropped some smoke and flare bombs to add to the confusion.

“Our presence is now known,” I said, inching back toward safety. “I suggest we get off this precarious jungle gym and back on the job.”

Moving carefully, sending more glass crashing down as our weight bent frames and panes slipped free, we crept back to the relative safety of the parapet.

I paused for a second.

“Get on the radio,” I told Diyan as he climbed up next to me. “Tell your troops to pull back their attack if they haven’t broken in, but to keep up the firing.”

“They have been repulsed on all sides.”

“Then tell them to cut their losses. We’ll do the blitz from the inside.”

WE MOVED on, Angelina and I leading in order to blast any resistance that appeared, while the others protected our flanks and rear. We pushed forward at a sweaty trot. We had to move fast, sow discord as we went—and find He. The first door opened onto a great circular staircase that seemed to spiral down to infinity. I didn't like the looks of it so I rolled some concussion grenades down it and we pressed on across the roof.

"Where to?" Angelina asked.

"That tangle of turrets and buildings up ahead seems to be larger and more functional than most of this place—that seems as good a guess as any." Something exploded on the tiles nearby and Angelina picked a sniper out of a window above with a single snapshot from the waist. We ran a bit faster, then pressed against the wall, above a straight drop to the valley below, while I blew out a locked door. Then we were in.

The place had been designed by a madman. I know that is literally true, but you didn't have to know He to get the message. We prowled corridors and stairs, twisted chambers, angled walls, even one spot where we had to crawl on our hands and knees under the low ceiling. This was where we had our first casualty. Five of us were clear of this room before the ceiling silently and swiftly descended and crushed the

rear guard before he could even make a sound. We were all sweating harder. The enemy we met were not armed for the most part and either fled or were dropped by our needle guns. All was speed and silence now—we moved as fast as we could between the bizarrely decorated walls, finding it easy to avoid looking at the incredible paintings that seemed to cover every meter of available space.

"Just one moment," Angelina panted, pulling me to a stop as we came through a high archway to a staircase that spiraled out of sight below, each stone step a different height from the others. "Do you know where we are going?"

"Not exactly," I panted in return. "We're simply penetrating the establishment to get ahead of the fighting, while spreading a bit of confusion."

"I thought we had bigger ambitions, like finding He."

"Any suggestions how we might go about that?" I am forced to admit that I snapped a bit. Angelina responded with saccharine sweetness.

"Why, yes. You might try turning on the time-energy detector you have slung around your neck. I believe that is the reason we brought it."

"Just what I was going to do anyway," I said, lying to conceal the fact that I had forgotten completely about the device in the white heat of combat.

The needle swung about and pointed with exact precision to the floor beneath our feet.

"Down and down we go," I ordered. "Where the time helix coils—there will be found the He, whom I am about to make into mincemeat." I meant every word—this was the third and last try. I had constructed a special bomb on which I had painted his name. It was a hellish mixture of a curdler—guaranteed to coagulate all protein within five meters—an explosive charge, a load of poisoned shrapnel and a thermite bomb to cook the curdled, coagulated, poisoned body of He.

After this the fighting picked up. Some sort of flame-thrower below sent an impenetrable wave of roiling smoke and fire up the stairs toward us. Singed and smoking, we crashed through a hole I blasted in the wall and dropped into a laboratory of sorts. Row after row of bubbling retorts stretched away in all directions, hooked to a maze of crystal plumbing. Dark liquids dripped and valves hissed foul-smelling steam. The workers here were unarmed and they dropped before us. We were trotting more slowly now and gasping for breath.

"Ughh!" Angelina said, making a twisted face. "Have you seen what is in those jars?"

"No, and I don't want to. Press on." Anything that could bother my cool Angelina was something

I had no desire to see at all. I was glad when we left this area behind and found another stairwell.

WE WERE getting close. Resistance began firming up and we had to battle most of the way now. Only the fact that the defenders were haphazardly armed allowed us to get through at all. Apparently most of the weapons were in use on the walls—these people came at us with knives, axes, lengths of metal. Screaming and frothing they rushed to the attack and slowed us just by the weight of their numbers. We had our next casualty when a man with a metal spike dropped from some cranny above and stabbed one of the Martians before I could shoot him. They died together and all we could do was leave them and push on. I took a quick look at my watch and broke into a tired trot again. We were running out of time.

"Wait," Diyan called out hoarsely. "The needle—it no longer points."

I waved everyone to a stop in a wide passage we were traversing and they dropped, covering the flanks. I looked at the time-energy detector that Diyan had been carrying.

"Which way was it pointing when you looked at it last?"

"Straight ahead—down the corridor. And there was no angle to the needle at all. The machine it pointed to must be on this level."

"It only works when the time helix is operating. The helix must be deactivated now."

"Could He have gone?" Angelina asked, speaking aloud the words I was trying to keep out of my thoughts.

"Probably not," I said with phony sincerity. "In any case, we have to push on as long as we can. One last effort now—dead ahead."

We pushed—and had another casualty when we attempted to cross a layer of writhing branches covered with thorns evidently tipped with poison. I finally had to burn out the stuff with our last thermite grenade. Ammunition and grenades were running short. A brisk firefight at the next corridor junction emptied my needle gun. I tossed it aside and kicked the heavy door that barred further progress in this direction.

It would have to be blown open and my grenades were exhausted. I turned to Angelina just as a communication plate next to the door lit up.

"You have lost your final chance," He said, grinning wickedly at me from the screen.

"I'm always willing to talk," I said, then spoke to Angelina in a language I was sure He did not speak. Only she and I knew it. "Any concussion grenades left?"

"I am talking—you will listen," He said.

"One," Angelina told me.

"I'm all ears," I said to him.

"Take out that door," I said to her.

"I have dispatched all the people I need to a safe place in the past where we will never be found. I have sent the machines we will need, I have sent everything that will be needed to build a time helix as well. I am the last to go—and when I leave the time machinery will be destroyed behind me."

The grenade exploded but the door was thick and remained stuck in the frame. Angelina sprayed it with explosive bullets. He talked on as though nothing were happening.

"I know who you are, little man from the future, and I know where you come from. Therefore I shall destroy you before you have a chance to be born. I will destroy you, my only enemy. Then the past and the future and all eternity will be mine—"

The door went down and I was the first one through.

My bullets were exploding in the delicate machinery of the time helix as my He-bomb arched through the air.

But he had already activated the time helix. Its green glow was gone—He was gone. My hell-bomb exploded in empty air and was more of a danger to us than to the vanished one it had been intended for. We dropped to the floor as death whizzed overhead and when we looked next the machinery in the room was dissolving.

He spoke again and the muzzle of my gun looked for him.

"I made this recording in case I had to leave abruptly, so sorry." He chuckled at his own bad humor. "I have gone now—you cannot follow me but I can follow you through time. And destroy you. But you have other enemies with you and I wish them to feel my vengeance too. They will die. You will all die—everything will die. I control eternity, destroy worlds. I will destroy this Earth. I leave you only enough time to consider and suffer. You cannot escape.

"In one hour every nuclear weapon on this planet will be triggered. Earth will be destroyed."

IV

LITTLE satisfaction was to be gained from blowing up the recording machine that had He's hateful voice coiled in its guts but I did it anyway—one shot. The thing exploded in a cloud of plastic bits and electronic components and the insane laughter was cut off in mid-cackle. Angelina patted my hand.

"You did your best," she said.

"But it wasn't good enough. I'm sorry I got you involved in this."

"I wouldn't want it any other way."

"This sounds like something very terrible will be done to your people," Diyan said. "I am very sorry."

"Nothing to feel sorry about.

We're all in the same boat."

"In one sense, yes. But Mars is saved and we who die here know that we accomplished at least that much. Our families and our people will live on."

"I wish I could say the same," I said with utmost gloom, borrowing his gun and picking off two of the enemy who tried to rush in through the broken door. "When we lost here we lost for all time. I'm surprised we are still around at all. We should have been snuffed out like candles."

"Isn't there anything we can do?" Angelina asked.

"Nothing I can think of. You can't outrun H-bombs. The time-helix equipment is kind of melted so that escape is out. What we need is a new time helix, which we are not going to get unless one appears out of thin air."

In echo to my words there was the sudden crack of displaced air above. I rolled and ducked, thinking the sound meant a new attack. It did not. A large green metal case hung unsupported in mid-air. Angelina looked at me in the strangest manner possible.

"If that is a time helix—you must tell me how you did it."

For once in my outspoken life I was silent, even more so when the box began to drift down before us and, just before it grounded, I read the lettering on the side.

TIME HELIX—OPEN WITH CARE

I didn't move. It all seemed too unbelievable. The two grav-chutes strapped to the top of the case, the timing device that had caused them to lower the whole thing to the floor, the small recording apparatus also fixed to the case with the boldly lettered words **PLAY ME** lettered across it. I boggled and gaped. It was ever-practical Angelina who stepped forward and pressed the starting button. Professor Coypu's voice rolled out to us.

"I suggest you get moving rather quickly. The bombs, you know, go off quite soon. I have been asked to tell you, Jim, that the bomb control apparatus is concealed in a cabinet on the far wall behind the dehydrated rations. It has been disguised to look like a portable radio because it really is a portable radio. With additions. If mishandled it will set all the bombs off instantly. Which would be uncomfortable. You are to set the three dials to the digits six-six-six, forming, I believe, the number of the beast. Set them in sequence from right to left. When they have been set press the off button. Now turn me off until you have done that. Be quick about it."

"All right, all right," I said, irritated, and switched him off. He had quite a commanding tone for an individual who wouldn't be born for another ten thousand years or so. And how come he knew so much? I complained, but I went

and did the job, hurling the dehydrated rations to the floor where they obviously belonged. They looked like lengths of yellowish-green desiccated octopus tentacles. Suckers and all. The radio was there. I did not attempt to move it, but set the dials as instructed and pressed the button.

"Nothing happened," I said.

"Which is just the way we want it," Angelina said, standing on tiptoe to give me an appreciative kiss on the cheek. "You have again saved the world."

FEELING proud of myself, I swaggered back to the recorder before the admiring gazes of the Martians and switched it on again.

"Don't think you have saved the world," Coypu said. Party pooper. "You have merely averted its destruction for approximately twenty-eight days. Once activated, the bombs wait that period, then self-destruct. But your Martian associates can profit from this delay. I believe they have supply ships on the way?"

"Due in fifteen days," Diyan said, hushed awe in his voice.

"Fifteen days, more than enough time. Earth will be destroyed, but when its present condition is considered this seems more a blessing than a tragedy. It is now time for you to open this case. On top of the controls is a molecular disrupter. If this is pointed at the outside wall—high up where the

small windows are—and angled down at fifteen degrees, it will cut a tunnel that will exit outside the walls. I suggest this be done as soon as possible. The Martians can get out that way. Now press button A and the time helix will form. James, Angelina, strap on the grav-chutes and leave as soon as the ready light comes on.”

Still partially unbelieving, I did as instructed. The time helix crackled into existence and groaned and sparked as it wound itself up. Diyan stepped forward, his hand out to take mine.

“We will never forget you and what you have done for our world. Generations yet unborn will read your name and accounts of your exploits in their schoolbooks.”

“Are you sure you have the spelling right?” I asked.

“You make light of this because you are a great and humble man.” That was the first time I had ever been accused of humility. Or of greatness, for that matter. “A statue will be erected with *James diGriz, World Saver* inscribed upon it.”

Each Martian shook my hand in turn—it was very embarrassing. There was an admiring gleam in Angelina’s eye as well, but women are simple creatures and enjoy basking even in reflected attention. Then the ready light came on and, after a few more goodbyes, we put on the grav-chutes as directed and—for the last time I sincerely

hoped—were bathed in the cool fire of the time force. Our contact must have triggered the apparatus because before I could make the very apropos remark that was on my lips everything went *zoinng*.

THE trip was no worse than any other, certainly no better. This was one kind of transportation I would never get adjusted to. Stars like speeding bullets, spiral galaxies whirling around like fireworks, movement that was no movement, time that was no time—we witnessed all the usual phenomena. The only feature that was good about the trip was its ending in the gymnasium of the Special Corps base, the largest open chamber there. We floated in mid-air, my Angelina and I, smiling madly at each other and oblivious to the cries of amazement from the sweating athletes below. We held hands in the simple happiness of knowledge that the future still lay ahead of us.

“Welcome home,” she said.

We floated down, waving to our friends and ignoring their questions for the moment. Coypu and the time lab came first—we had to report. I knew a quick feeling of unhappiness that He had escaped me and hoped that the next time he was tracked down a few very large bombs could be sent in my place.

Coypu looked up and gaped. “What are you doing here?” he

said. "You are supposed to be eliminating this He person. Didn't you get my message?"

"Message?" I asked.

"Yes. We made ten thousand metal cubes and sent them back to Earth. Sure you would get one of them. Radio direction and such."

"Oh, *that* old message. Received and acted upon, but you are a little out of date. What is that doing here?" I'm afraid my voice rose a bit on this last as I pointed with vibrating finger at the compact machine across the room.

"That? Our Mark One compact folding time helix? What else should it be doing? We have just finished it."

"You've never used it?"

"Never."

"Well you are going to use it now. You have to strap a couple of grav-chutes to it—here, use these—and a recorder and a molecular disrupter and shoot it right back to save Angelina and me."

"I have a pocket recorder, but why—" He took a familiar-looking machine from his lab coat.

"Do it first—explanations can come later. Angelina and I are about to be blown up if you don't do this right."

I grabbed some paint and wrote **PLAY ME** on the recorder, then **TIME HELIX—OPEN WITH CARE** on the machine. The exact moment when He had left Earth was determined by the time-tracer and the arrival for this cargo set for a few

minutes later on the big helix. Coypu dictated the tape under my instruction and it wasn't until the whole bundle was whisked back into the past that I heaved a grateful sigh of relief.

"We are saved," I said. "Now for that drink you promised me."

"I didn't promise—"

"I'll have it anyway."

COYPU was muttering to himself and scratching on a pad while I prepared some hefty drinks for Angelina and myself. We clunked glasses and were baptizing our throats when he came over.

"I needed that," I said. "It must be ages since I last had a drink."

"It is all coming clear at last," Coypu said.

"Is it all right if we sit while we listen? It's been a busy couple of hundred thousand years."

"Yes, by all means. Let me retrace the course of events. A time attack was launched upon the Corps by He, a most successful assault. Our numbers were quite reduced—"

"Yes, like down to two. You and me."

"Quite right. Though as soon as I had dispatched you to the year nineteen seventy-five I found that all things were as they had been. They reverted most suddenly. I was all alone one instant—then the laboratory was full of people who never knew they had been gone. We put in a lot of work on improving

the time-tracking techniques—took us almost four years to get things the way we wanted.”

“Did you say four years?”

“Nearer five before we got it operational. The trails were distant and hard to follow, most tangled as well.”

“Angelina!” I cried with sudden realization. “You never told me you had been here alone for five years.”

“I didn’t think you liked older women.”

“I love them as long as they are you. You were lonely?”

“Hideously. Which is why I volunteered to go after you. Inskipp had another volunteer but he broke his leg.”

“My darling—I bet I know how that happened—”

She is not the blushing type but she did lower her eyes.

“We are getting ahead in sequence.” Coypu said. “But that is what happened. We traced you from nineteen seventy-five to eighteen-oh-seven—and traced He and his minions as well. There was a loop in time there, an anomaly of some kind that eventually sealed itself off. We could tell that it was to collapse with you sealed inside it and succeeded at last in forcing enough power into the helix to penetrate the sealed loop just before it went down. That was when Angelina went back with the coordinates for your next skip in time, the long twenty-thousand-year

jump after He. You had to go after him because the time paths were there to prove that you had followed him. Though, of course, history was clear by then and we knew how it would all end.”

“You knew?” I asked, feeling I had missed the point somewhere.

“Of course, The entire nature of the attack was clear, though you all, of course, had to fulfill your destined roles.”

“Could you spell it out again? And slowly.”

“Of course, You managed to destroy He’s operation twice in the remote past and eventually reset his machine and sent him forward to the twilight days of Earth. Here he spent an immense amount of time, almost two hundred years, climbing to power and uniting all the planet’s resources. He was a genius, albeit a mad one, and could do this. He also remembered you, Jim—fading memories and half insane ones after two hundred years, but he remembered enough to know you were the enemy. Therefore he launched a time war to destroy you before you could destroy him, trapping you as he thought on a planet about to be destroyed by atomic explosion. From there he returned to 1975 to attack the Corps. You came after him and he fled to 1807 to lay the time loop trap for him. I don’t know where he planned to go from there but his plans appear to have been altered and he went instead

twenty thousand years ahead."

"I did that, altered the setting on his machine just before he left."

"That is all there is to it. We can relax now that it is over and I do believe I'll join you in that drink."

"Relax?" The word came from my throat with a singularly nasty grating sound. "From what you have said it sounds as if I started the whole attack on the Special Corps by altering the setting on the time helix that sent He to the world where he launched his campaign to destroy the Corps."

"That's one way of looking at it."

"IS THERE any other? The way I see it, He just bounces in a circle in time forever. Running from me, chasing me, running from me . . . Damn! When was he born? Where does he come from?"

"Those terms are meaningless in this sort of temporal relationship. He exists only within this time loop. If you wish to say it, though it is most imprecise, it would be fair to say that he never was born. The situation exists apart from time as we normally know it. As does the fact that you returned here with the information to be sent to yourself about the settings on the atomic bombs to enable you to return here to inform yourself about the settings on the bombs in order—"

"Enough!" I groaned, reaching for the bottle with trembling hand. "Just mark the mission as being

accomplished and put me in for a fat bonus. To think that I gave up the occupation of an honest thief to become involved in this sort of thing."

"Thief is the correct word," a nauseatingly familiar voice cried out. "And crook, con man, black-mailer, briber and more." Inskipp stood in the doorway waving his florid face and a sheaf of papers in my direction. "Five years I have been waiting for you, diGriz, and this time you are not getting away. No excuses like time wars now. You crook, you steal from your buddies, urghh!"

He said, *Urrgh!* because Angelina had popped a sleep capsule under his nose. He folded gently to the floor. She grabbed the sheaf of papers, then took me by the arm.

"After five years I need you more than that nasty old man does. Let's burn this file and steal a ship before he comes to. It will be months before he can find us and by that time something else will have come up and he will need us to work again. We can have a lovely crooked honeymoon."

"Wonderful! Here's to crime!"

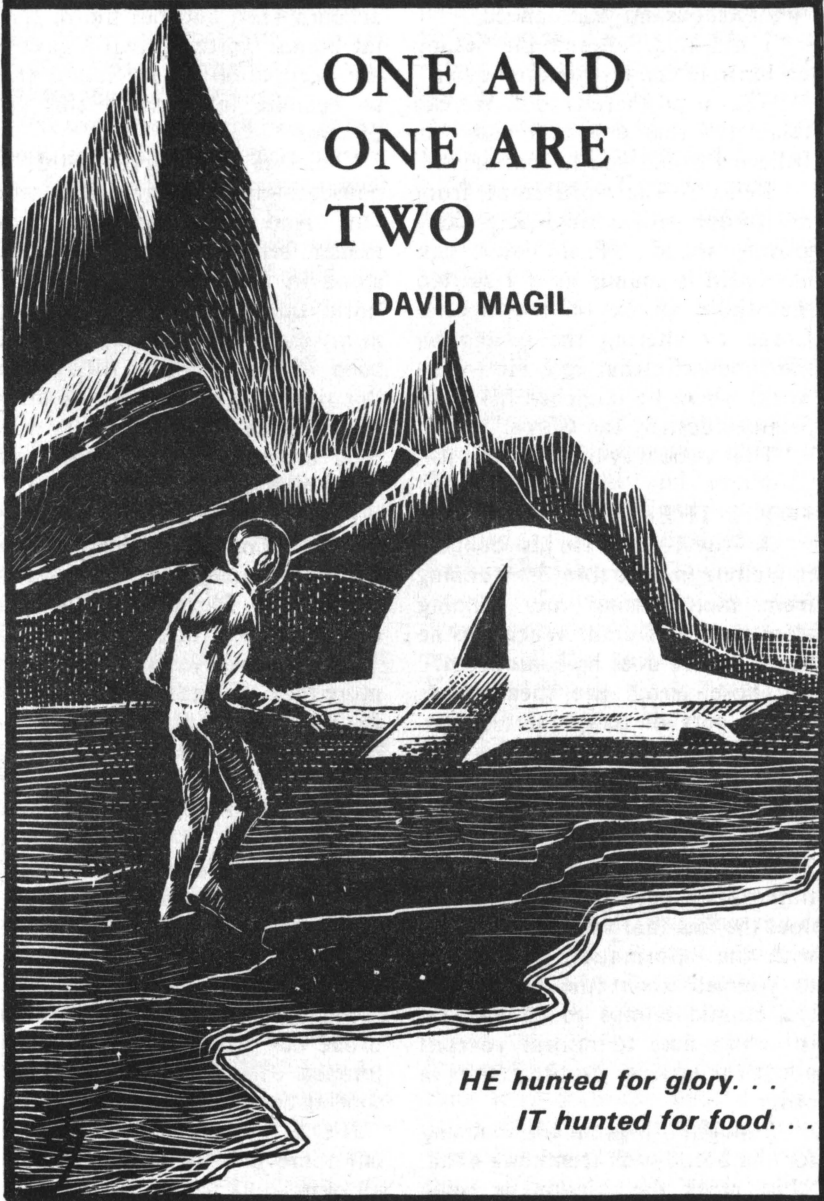
"Here's to time," Coypu said, getting in the spirit of the thing.

We shouted our toasts together, broke our glasses against the wall, jumped lightly over Inskipp's snoring body and were out the door.

It's a bright, glorious universe out there and we intend to enjoy all of it. ●

ONE AND ONE ARE TWO

DAVID MAGIL



*HE hunted for glory. . .
IT hunted for food. . .*

WILLIAM'S small tractor-mounted probe had checked the atmosphere. It was similar to Earth's. The radiation levels, were high but safe. The surface was cool and firm. The climate was temperate. The probe had also found the source of the signals. The cameras were pointed directly at it. The signals came from a saucer-like object, a domed thing with a port in it. The port was open. The probe's antennas were right on it. The steady, weak, primitive signal continued.

In stationary orbit high over the moving planetoid, Williams was at the controls of his ship, the HG. He and the Russian, Mareshefsky, watched the control room screens as Bella locked herself into the HG's Lander and then separated from the mother ship for the quick flight down.

Their probe on the planetoid's surface picked up the Lander's touchdown. The white of the man-made Lander was another confirmation that the colors Williams and Mareshefsky saw on the HG's screens were true. The intensity of the color was almost blinding. The sea's redness was topped with whitecaps. The beach, if it was a beach, wore purple colors. The vegetation, bushes, grass, even the few stunted trees were all in blue tones and the mountains, high and

sharply cut, displayed a fury of multiple color, as if a child had gone mad with a crayon box.

Williams reached forward and switched on another screen. The Earth Interplanetary Enforcers were still patrolling. They were protecting the life form on the planetoid. The HG's screens showed they were still focused on the decoy. If they changed their focus Williams knew that he would be in a race for his life. The Enforcers had orders to blast him out of the sky. If they caught him, they'd blast him.

Mareshefsky watched Williams. It was not easy for him to admit that Williams was the master hunter. Earth's zoos held more monsters that Williams had brought back alive from space than had been captured by all the other hunters combined.

"I'm opening now," came Bella's voice from the planetoid, clear, sweet, true. The steady and continuous background signal from the domed saucer was on minimal amplification on the same frequency.

Williams turned a switching gear to focus his probe's cameras on the Lander. Mareshefsky stood up to look as the Lander's port slowly dropped open. When it was down, still there was no movement.

"One hour from now, yes?"

Bella asked, checking her time.

"Yes," Williams answered.

"I'll increase the wager. I'll get it within twenty minutes," her voice said. "I'll double my bet on that."

"Not for me," Williams said.

"I accept you," Mareshefsky told her.

"Good. It'll be too easy," she said. And then they saw her on their screens. After the probe's check of the atmosphere Williams had said he still would use breathing apparatus and a suit, but Bella had insisted on using nothing. She came into full focus on the HG's screens. Her form-fitting one-piece suit looked as stylish as anything on the most fashionable street on Earth. She was a stunningly made, beautiful woman. Her hair blew in the wind of the planetoid and somehow with that the menace seemed to be less. It was easy to forget that the on-the-job mortality rate among hunters was close to one hundred percent. The hunters who survived at any given time were as ruthless and vicious as the do-gooders and the Protectionists on Earth claimed they were.

Williams thought she was a fool and fools bored him. To go down to try to capture whatever was on the planetoid was an occupational lunacy—but to do it as if you were going to a style show was so stupid

that it embarrassed him. If she was going down to seduce whatever was in the thing or on it, she was dressed for it. But in the light of his memories of the monstrous beings that lived and grew in space she was mad, Williams thought.

BUT he watched carefully and professionally as she climbed down, faced the probe's cameras and smiled brilliantly. She was corrupt, she was rotten, she was as loathsome as Mareshefsky was—as he himself was—and yet, seeing her standing there, he had to admit that she looked like an angel.

"Everything's quiet," Bella said. "There's a strong wind—an Earth feel to it. With it and the temperature it is like a spring day. The colors are extreme. We were wrong about them. They are far beyond the range and values of your cameras." She walked a few steps. "There's a feeling of artificiality. I don't know why. I just suddenly felt that. The surface is firm—but strange. It has an almost papier-maché feeling underfoot. But I see no imprint in it, not my footprints and not anyone else's or any thing's."

A honking noise came from the audio system.

Williams said, "The horn."

"I just let out the horn sounds," Bella said from the planetoid.

"No response. Not yet. The environment gives me a strong feeling that this place is uninhabited. I feel that I'm the first. But I have an intuitive unease. I feel threatened."

They watched her walk around, the probe and the Lander managing fully to cover her through their cameras. Williams frequently checked out to the Enforcer ships. If the Enforcers came the understanding was that whichever of the three hunters was on the planetoid would be abandoned. But there was no threat from that quarter—not yet.

"I see nothing but the dome. It's a dome, though, on a saucerlike object. I don't think you can see it on your screens, but there's a clear material, a plastic or glass, a pod that it's standing on. From here I see no light emanations. My heat detector shows specific warmth in the interior. Clearly no damage visible. There's no suggestion of a crash landing. Ah, there's something—an insignia right by the door. Can you get a closeup of it? From here it seems a diamond shape with forms—calligraphic forms—inside. It isn't a natural phenomenon. It couldn't be. I don't think it is. I'm letting the horn go again, on the high frequencies."

Williams moved the lumbering

probe to a spot closer to her. It got a front view and through her thin clothing it was possible to see that she was aroused, excited.

"No response," she said. "There seems a complete seal. Only this one port. No visible exhausts. No moving parts. The radiation level is high, extremely high."

The two men in the HG watched.

"Sorry," Bella said. "I was just thinking. There doesn't seem any alternative. I have to go aboard it. I feel slight panic. I'm glad I don't have on a suit. I feel bound up enough as it is. I have to admit that right at the end, right before confrontation, I always am terrified. I always feel like vomiting. I'm adjusting my weapon to maximum. If anything is in there and comes at me I'm not going to take a chance on trying to reason with it."

"It's a hell of a thing," she said, just an exclamation. "Look. Next time we do this, let's use a drag antenna. Who knows whether our radio signals will come out of the thing. Sorry. That was me swallowing. I confess that I feel absolute foreboding and terror. I feel the way I felt when I was a child and had to perform or recite. How did I ever get here? What am I doing here? "Well, it is my game. I'm going in."

They watched her lift her foot and touch the domed saucer's

ramp. "Lucky," she said. "First step. No bolts of energy have charged through me. From here, by the way, I'd say the material is definitely a ceramic. Okay. Next step. It's not possible to see anything inside. It's just darkness. Wait! Now I can. There's a flame or light in there. Nothing else. It doesn't seem to illuminate anything. Just a flame, a bottled flame. I don't know what it is.

"I'm at the top now. Can you see me? I guess I can't stall. I'm going in. Nothing except that flame. Well, here goes nothing. I'm now—"

WILLIAMS checked the Enforcers' position and then broadened the focus of the probe's cameras on the domed saucer. They waited.

"Use a drag antenna if you go down," Williams said.

"Yes," Mareshefsky said. "Twenty seconds."

Williams looked at the big Russian hunter and then they both looked at the screens, waited, watched.

"One minute. She must see something in it."

"Maybe," Williams said.

The digital clocks clicked off the time.

"I'm afraid of nothing, you know."

"Oh," Williams said.

"Ninety seconds. But now I have a tightening in my chest. What is happening down there?"

Williams looked at the screen. Nothing seemed to be happening. The blue grasses were blowing in the wind—the red sea was whipping up more whitecaps. The white saucer was just sitting there.

"Two minutes. A long time."

They kept watching.

"Five minutes," Mareshefsky read the clock.

"Start counting to the Lander's liftoff now."

"You think she's not returning."

Williams said nothing.

Mareshefsky watched the clocks, sometimes recited the figures. Williams went on playing his chess game with the computer.

"Five minutes to the Lander's liftoff," Mareshefsky said.

Williams moved his King out of check and then reached over and turned down a volume control. The microphonic pickups on both the probe and the Lander sent the sound of the Lander's horns and then its mechanical voice up to the HG. *Four minutes, thirty seconds to liftoff. Mark.* And then came the interminable sighing of the lonely wind for thirty seconds and then the new time. Every thirty seconds the voice spoke. And then it was time.

"Liftoff," Mareshefsky said.

Williams had raised his eyes to watch it. The propulsion didn't kick up dust or debris. He checked the monitor board and saw that the Lander was returning with no problem.

He turned to look at Mareshefsky. "You want your turn?"

"Is it possible to put the probe aboard the saucer?"

"That's reasonable." Williams swung his chair around and reached forward to activate the probe. He set it off, the tractor tread slowly spinning to turn it, and then he moved it across the space and then up onto the ramp and slowly up it.

"Now we see," Mareshefsky said.

Williams held the probe right at the top of the ramp and they looked in by way of the little probe's cameras. All they saw was the flame.

"If anyone is inside, please come out," Williams spoke in English through his microphone. The echo of his voice came back from the probe.

To Mareshefsky, he said, "I'm going to try to run it in and put an automatic withdrawal on it. Ready. Now."

The probe moved in. The screens went dead.

MARESHEFSKY came into the control room of the HG. Williams was still playing chess, infrequently watching the Enforcer ships, still receiving the constant, steady and unchanging signal from the domed saucer on the planetoid. Williams must have heard the Russian enter, but he didn't acknowledge the man.

Finally Mareshefsky said, "I think I will go down now."

"An hour? Or you want longer?"

"An hour should be enough."

Williams reached out his hand and readjusted the timers, the entire cycling of the Lander.

"I can offer you another probe. There are weapons, quite an assortment in there. Or free advice," Williams said, clearly not involved, moving his queen to check the computer.

"I like you, Williams. For these years, as you have beaten me again and again, I haven't thought well of you. But now, actually being with you, I like you. You really don't care. You don't care about Bella. You don't care about the Enforcers. You don't care about yourself."

"You're wrong. I care. I'll even suggest you give up. Don't go down there. It's not worth it."

"You would lie if I asked, but I will tell you, Williams. If it happens that I do not come back—

my friend, you will take your turn. I am a gambler and you are one and I tell you that you will take your turn. It is a thing that we do. And I do not want your advice or your weapons or your anything else. If I am a hunter, I am one. If my hunting is not good enough then I'll get what I deserve."

"If we got what we deserved we all would have been struck down in our infancy."

"Are you troubled about what we've done? Think if it happened to men. A few taken away, thrown into their zoos. Who would give a damn? And as far as wiping out life on planets by being too casual about antibacterial checks, we've all done it. It has no importance. The whole of space is filled, crowded with things. We're not big enough to dent it. There's nothing we could do that would rate being recorded in a Universal history, no act, no crime, nothing."

Williams shrugged.

"Luck," he said.

"I will use a drag antenna for you."

"If it won't get in your way."

"It is nothing. If I return successfully we will go ahead with the partnership?"

"Why not?"

"Williams," the big Russian said as a farewell.

"Mareshefsky."

Williams didn't even watch, not until the Lander touched down. Then he sat back, put up his feet and studied the screens. Nothing had changed. The screen was filled with the damned domed saucer or whatever it was. The surface of the planetoid was unchanged, nothing had moved. The moving body, the planetoid, of whatever material, was constantly facing the Earth's sun. The light fell at a slight angle on the dome, but there was fully adequate illumination.

"I'm down now. There is little to say. I'm standing on it. It is exactly as Bella said. Colors are very extreme. I would say that you'd be impressed by the mountains. Their height is considerable. And the sea, the sea is a red ocean building up to a storm. Very well. Williams, if the Enforcers come at you, know that I would not mind finishing here. It is not unpleasant. It has a calm feeling to it. "I'm now facing the saucer. It is definitely a ship, perhaps made by a molding process. I've never seen the material. Call it a porous ceramic—a semiporous ceramic. My guess would be magnetic- or beam-powered. No moving parts visible and no concession to aeronautic considerations. An incongruity with this atmosphere." "Why isn't it a dwelling?" Williams asked.

"Why would it be?" Mareshefsky answered. "It has the feeling of a ship.

"Bella, Bella," Mareshefsky called. Williams turned up the radio from the Lander's pickup. "Nothing. I'm calling but there is no response." He was quiet again, just walking around the thing, trying to tempt whatever was inside to make a move. "What the hell can it be?" he muttered.

"I say give it up. There are a lot more you can get easier. Let the Enforcers get it or not get it."

"I couldn't rest. What is it? Space is a bore. This is a mystery. I think I will go aboard now."

"Take a shot at it. You may stun whatever's in the thing."

"An idea. But if Bella is in there—"

"Forget Bella," Williams said.

"I'm now on the ramp. The antenna is with me. The wind suddenly has picked up. There's a howling sound to it. But it's all

right. Good. I almost slipped. There's a dark slippery substance at the top of the ramp."

On the HG Williams watched as Mareshefsky drew his weapon.

"I'm right at the entrance now. I can see in clearly. It is exactly as we saw it. A light, perhaps nothing more than an incandescent bulb. Not clear. For a moment I thought I almost saw a movement in the upper part of the craft, a convulsive move. I couldn't feel anything here. You can hear me. I will just put my head in. Now I am—"

The voice stopped. Williams watched the Russian fall forward into the domed saucer.

"Mareshefsky?" Williams called.

There was no answer, only the continuing *ping, ping, ping-ping—, ping, ping-ping* from the domed saucer's transmitter.

Williams reached over and put the Lander's television lens on full power. He could read MADE IN JAPAN on the sole of the

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Russian's shoe.

"Mareshefsky!"

Steadily, without being able to see anything inside the domed saucer, Williams watched as Mareshefsky's body was slowly dragged inside.

"Mareshefsky!" Williams called.

He waited and watched. He didn't recall the Lander. He let it spend its full time on the planetoid's surface. But when the one hour was over he didn't allow any more. As soon as it returned to the HG, Williams secured it. He secured the HG. He programmed it for the return to Mars, for the long swing around to Earth. He hesitated for a moment and then moved his finger to press the buttons that would start the return journey.

He couldn't do it. He argued and damned and cursed himself, but he just couldn't do it.

He had to go down. He got his suit, attached the equipment he always used. After each move he paused to call himself a dirty name. He was the worst damn fool. Why did he have to go? He didn't need whatever was down there. He didn't need the money. He didn't need the credit. Why couldn't he just let it go?

But he couldn't. Even as he climbed into the Lander and carefully set everything to full manual

control he fought with himself. But he released from the HG and he went down. No magic or romanticism drove him. He felt no force, no obligation, no loyalty. He was going down because he was a fool. He couldn't resist the challenge. He had to find out what the damned thing was.

He put the Lander down just behind the domed saucer, not in front where the others had come in.

As soon as he put his foot on the surface of the planetoid he let loose with a blast from his weapon and then he did it five more times. Then he walked up to the saucer, turned his blaster high and blew a part of the pod apart. There was a sharp crack, a shrieking sound. The thing tottered and swayed to one side. Williams walked around to the port side. He turned his blaster at the port and he fired into it. He walked up the twisted but otherwise intact ramp and saw the lamp inside and he blasted that.

And then he walked into the saucer, the dome.

The planetoid kept moving. It moved beyond the concern of the Enforcers, of the do-gooders on Earth. It moved out into deeper space sending its radio invitation to anyone who would listen. One and one are two. One and one are two.

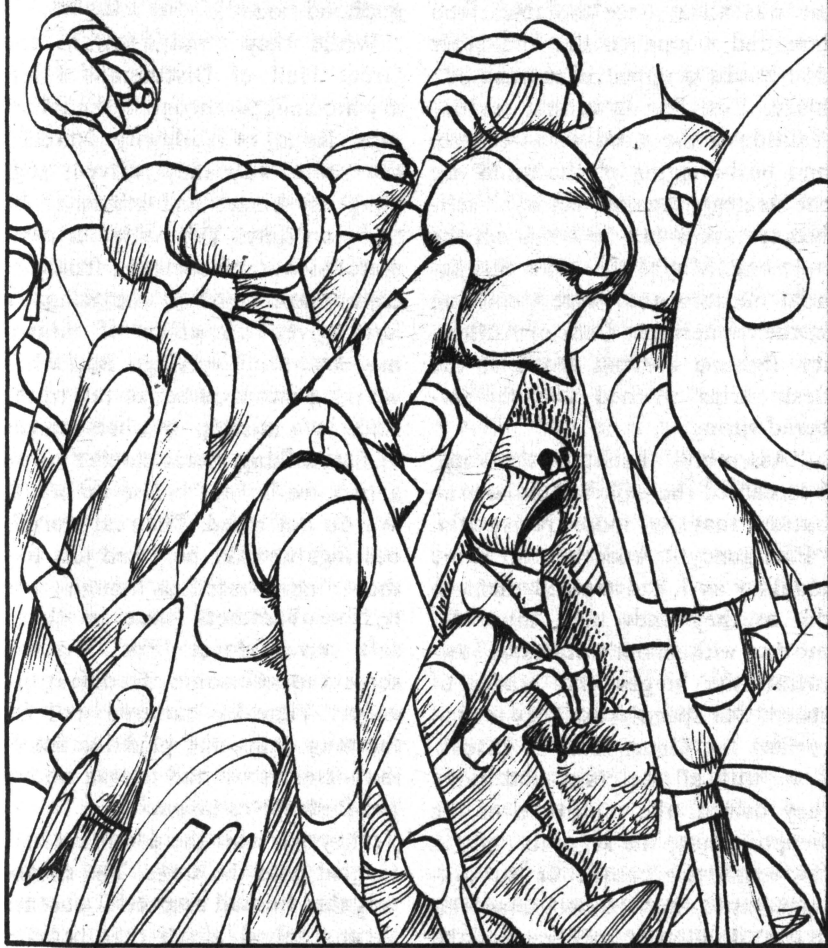
Ping, Ping, ping—ping.

It was still hungry. ●

*Of Earth and the sun
and the might of man!*

DAVID R. BUNCH

TWO SUNS FOR THE KING



IT was spring again. April—and the vapor shield was pale new-apple green. A gnawing was in my flesh strips, sharp ache and longing tear—or many tears, maybe, attempting to bring my heart rain, trying to surface and soften my new-metal steel. The Stronghold air was all at once too thick, too hot, and it smelled like old brass doorknobs dropped in a trash-box blaze. Yes! Spring is that season! Caution is the word—iron control and bird-dogging of the mind are the strategy. Against betrayal, self-betrayal. And maybe I was not the only one. Maybe the other Stronghold masters, too, were trembling in their innermost Cells of Authority, fighting a silent battle as the flesh strips writhed and remembered spring. . .

“Assembly!” I shouted the word. I screamed the call. I thumbed the button that let loose Noisy-Din. “Emergency!” And they all came toggling as I had trained them to do, as they knew they must do, moving with shank’s mares of new-metal, the hinges and braces of speed. Our speed! Yes. They tended toward the Great Hall of Discussions with all the clank and hurry they owned, the multitude of the weapons men, the servants—just a few—and the couple or so mutants (little flesh bums dressed all in tin) I allowed at times in the

Stronghold so that I might be amused. (Horrible soft mushy people inside their tin, the flesh bums; not at all the bright and shiny solid grace we Stronghold people are, taut and straight in our new-metal steel replacements, with just a few flesh strips holding our godhood bound).

While they “ran” toward the Great Hall of Discussions I left my hip-snuggie throne in the innermost Room of Authority. I moved the same way they moved, toggling my hinges and braces to be there on time. Yes, with our new-metal steel replacements, from the commonest churl to the King we have given up grace of animal movement in walking. But when we bang into a corner or fall to the floor in a misstep or when a piece of battle-flung metal catches us on a part we do not bruise or break. We do not bleed. The real world’s beatings we take now and just pay them a never-mind, as though those terrible hammers were in thick, soft velvet gloves. Yes. We win some and lose some. To defeat old enemy Time we bartered well for the long gains and paid the fee of the losses as we had to—as we cut our flesh selves down.

They were all there waiting as I toggled onto the stage. The silence was that hushed respectful absence of any sound at all that benefits

the entrance of the King. They had to be ready to storm the gates of utter impossibility if I so hinted—and they knew it. But my request this time was mild, though not so mildly put. I was emotional. I let them know the wish of their gleaming King—I screamed it. But what I demanded should not have been a thing too hard to come by even at this late date.

“Make me an acre!” I cried. “An acre of soil!” The looks of the weapons men and the servants were all of disbelief. “I would plant crops and cultivate, this softest of the spring months of the year. Something deep in my flesh strips grows, unfolds, flowers and cries for husbandry at this year-time that was once verdant with newborn leaves and stems. But now in our great steel times nothing is born, all is made. Only the vapor shield is live new-apple green—the rest is all cold steel. Ah, it is beautiful, the precision we’ve gained, the flowers all up in metal in their rows, the leaves all folding out ersatz and shiny as the great trees leap through the yard holes at the press of a switch. And the grass that comes is just-so green, a nice ever-last carpet as chunks of the prearranged plastic tumble upside down! All this at the turn of a switch. But it leaves a somehow hunger deep in some empty wells. The flesh strips

writhe and remember. So make me an acre of soil!”

THE looks of the weapons men and the servants continued all disbelief. Whispers marched through the room and a small stale ribbon of sighs went out. And finally my head weapons man, Slag Morgbawn, dour and efficient, once himself a Stronghold master and a “replaced” man, his lone flesh strip alive now in a built-in pickle jar, spoke.

“With all due respect to our chief,” he said, “and your station of merit and the fact that you are a kind of King—an acre of soil is about as possible just now as our handing you the sun nestled in a little bucket of ice. Not that we wouldn’t do it, if we could, Sire, you understand—hand you the sun, I mean, nestled in a little bucket of ice. But some things are just not to be done, Sire, no matter how keen the desire of the would-be doer. Or how shining great and honored the demander.”

“An acre of soil!” I repeated my cry. “Excuses are for old-women warriors who exaggerate always the deed to be done. Are any old-women warriors present? Ah, I thought not. There are millions of acres of soil, many as close as the reach of our ever-last mechanized eyeballs. And one acre’s procure-

ment for me, your King, you compare with the sun riding a small bucket of ice and set at my feet? Break out the little blasters! Don't tell me the greatest Stronghold on Earth will boggle at such a tiny request as the need of a little planting dirt for its master's spring cropping. I know our soil now, for many sterilized reasons, is under a few feet of plastic and that on top of a goodly apron of concrete sometimes laid on steel. Certainly we've hidden the soil after 'they' mined it, raped it, poisoned it, totally ravaged it for the things of 'their' greed. But break out the little portable blasters! I'm sure our great Stronghold—toward which all other Strongholds think in shudder and shame, being so deeply in fear of us—can blast down a hill or two. We can penetrate those few feet of plastic, that concrete and, if need be, that bedrock of steel! Will we find soil to our liking? Has the ransacked dirt come back after lying for years under its blanket of plastic, its comforter of concrete and, in some cases, its bundler of steel? Has the soil been cleansed? Has the sick Earth sweetened? Listen," I said, pulling taut my leg uplifters to make me the tallest of the tall and pressing the small neck button that would give my voice more shove, "if we ask doubting questions what will

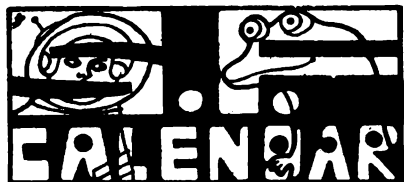
ever get done? Where will our destiny be? If we had never done more—wouldn't we still be tail-tied to trees, hairy and dumb, meat-bodied, flesh-aped to nothing, not knowing? Break out the little blasters. Pulverize me a hill! But don't *blam* it. Don't blow it to high skies and all winds—just make me an acre of soil!"

SO THERE we were that apple-green April day preparing to war on a hill. All the kill-potential of Stronghold 10 could be employed to expedite our task, if need should dictate an all-out war on the plastic mound. But I had given the order for little tag-along blasters, as seemed to fit the need. All my weapons men and their mechanical stale ribbon of doubting sighs would obey. Yes!

Soon we were out in the field as if geared for war, riding our crawl-track transports with our portable weapons of ultimate destruction all to the sides and the rear and I felt more like a god than a King. (After all, how many Kings have created an acre of soil in an apple-green vapor month?) The logistics of the little blasters attack and all the attendant problems of invasion were handled ably by my weapons men headed, a little reluctantly I'm afraid, by Slag Morgbawn, the

most feared weapons man in all wide Moderan. I'm thinking he thought it a little beneath him to be planning attacks on a hill that had no purpose other than being hill. But perhaps the fierce and the mighty need some shame at times, a homely humbling little task to take them clear back to themselves

and restore them to the realities. I carried a tiny sprig of spring-metal blooms and hummed a lilting tune as we pressed toward the hill. The tin and silver birds of Central Seasons spring, released by throwing switches in Bird Control, flew far and wide, filled the air with the whooshing of their jets and blew



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their sharp metal shrill. Ah, spring!

We opened on the hill. We moved in close and let it have our shots. We cracked it wide! We crushed it down. We went through plastic, concrete and steel with penetrating blasts. In some ways it was like cracking and peeling some giant bird's three-layered egg. What did we find inside the three-layered egg?

Had rattlesnakes come back? Had buzzing death been imprisoned to live all that while in our little hill? Our instruments droned their warning and we moved away from the illness that spoke to us from the unwell soil. It was contaminated, ruined, still ailing.

We moved against other hills. We blasted and cut them down. We moved in with our gauges and heard that awful drone. Hill after grim hill. Until very late in the afternoon my pride came loose and I stood up and shouted at the whole wide high mocking air and green heaven, "Two buckets of good soil! I'll settle for two buckets of good soil!"

Did a god somewhere hear? Well, what's to believe about such things?

They stood before me, two little flesh mutant-men, disfigured, all down-drooped in the shoulders and looking back-sprained, with gristle-meat faces and hands that must have been through a broil. But

smiling. Smiling at the clown King now with his pride all on the ground. And offered two small buckets of soil, one from each man.

Oh, God . . .

So we went on home—all that kill potential now led by a King cut down to clown, carrying two precious buckets of soil through the apple-green spring air as though they were jewel boxes filled full of diamonds in gold. (Don't ask me where they got soil. Under some secret hill, out of some dark lost cranny, up from some deep-down well? Two buckets of pure uncontaminated soil that just sat there and looked glum and quiet at all our instruments' cajoling. Not a peep, not a tick was uttered when our gauges passed nearby or probed in deep to see if this soil would talk, speak of an illness.)

Yes, I planted sunflowers that spring to grow the sun out of two buckets of sweet pure soil. They came up and flourished. In July they bloomed, high on the Stronghold wall, two gold spots waving. Slag Morgbawn came to look one day in mid-July. He stood by my side high on the Stronghold wall, his lone flesh strip alive in its solution in the built-in pickle jar, his manner dour, as always.

I could not resist saying: "When your King seems to want the sun, just obey the orders, huh?" ●

Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

FORTUNATELY for most science-fiction readers, Isaac Asimov has not only begun to write fiction again, but his older novels are being re-issued by Fawcett Crest books. Eight are currently available and the others will soon appear—all will carry a uniform price of 75¢.

Among those now on the stands is *Pebble in the Sky*, the first novel by Asimov—and still my favorite. This one uses time travel, telepathy and a number of other devices to define its point—an Earth that is despised by the great Trantorian Galactic Empire. A humble and elderly tailor from 1950 finds himself involved in a war Earth has declared against the entire Empire and has his loyalty twisted and tested severely. It makes for a first-

rate story—and for the discerning, suggests possibilities that were mysteriously never used by the later Second Foundation—or were they?

A novel that is much less known than it should be, unlike the first, is *The End of Eternity*. This deals with the masters of time, who can enter a time tube not only to observe all time—but to busy themselves with changing every era to suit their ideals of what should be. But for each change that is made, some trouble crops up to force them to redesign continually. They keep the inventions of each age, of course, even when they destroy the inventors—and they serve as the ultimate master race.

Harlan is a man who has been brought into the time tube and educated to be one of the changers of

what is beyond the exclusive world of the tube. But he falls for a girl from a period that he must change. She may exist after the change—but with another culture, another history and another personality to fit the newly altered age. She won't be the woman he loves. Despite the rigid laws of his time mastership he removes her and tries to hide her in the far future, while he goes back to help find why the whole time-tube system is in grave danger—it may fail completely because the probability is that it will never be invented back in the past!

Other writers have used the basic device, but I know of no one who has wrung as much out of it or has developed all the possibilities of paradox. The story is a romance with a surprise. It is also a twisted, convoluted puzzle—and it is a book no Asimov fan should fail to read.

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK seems to have returned to the science-fiction fold. Most of his work during the last few years has been in fantasy. He has written of ghosts, goblins and Shakespeare; of reincarnations of ancient superstitions and civil war heroes and of outright mysticism. But in his latest book, the feeling is again that of science fiction, though man's beliefs and what may be true of them are still central to his theme.

His *A Choice of Gods* (Putnam, \$4.95) is somewhat reminiscent of the *City* series. Again we have most of mankind gone away, as was true at the end of the aforementioned series. Robots are taking care of the planet—the Indians have been left behind and are trying to become one with nature in the old ways, though with much better understanding through what they learned from their European conquerors. The story is slow-paced, filled with touches of nostalgia and pastoral longings—this may be either an asset or a liability, depending on the reader. I enjoyed the book.

Basically, the situation is that mankind has suddenly and almost completely disappeared. Only a few awake one morning to find that most people have vanished—either through a miracle or by having been kidnaped, snatched into space by some mysterious force. A party gathered in one house is mysteriously untouched, and man's survival must depend on them. Later they discover that a few bands of Indians have also survived. The "whites" try to conserve western technology, but fail for want of numbers and specialized education. The "redskins" don't even try; they feel this is a chance to take back their land and revert to the old ways that best fit them.

The robots try for a while to serve man, but there are too many of them. Some go off to build a mysterious structure of their own. A few others move into a sort of monastery to study and extend the old faith of man.

The human survivors soon discover that their life-span has been extended to about five thousand years of excellent health. Later, when their numbers increase, they discover that they can "teleport" themselves to other worlds. All but two leave for the stars, though they can still communicate with those on Earth who are preserving the old homestead.

Eight thousand years after the vanishment, John, a far wanderer returns from the stars at about the same time an alien, resembling a "can of worms," comes to Earth seeking a soul. John has found three worlds where the people—those who vanished—have been placed. The worlds are still in the state of technical science and human aggression. John has also been made aware of a Principal, so different from human beings that he can never call it good or evil, though he shuns it instinctively.

Finally John and his companions learn that the people are returning in a scout ship, almost certainly to ravage and take over Earth again.

Simak has woven much more

worth saying than can be covered here. He has also spent a great deal of time developing the philosophical attitudes of his people and robots—attitudes representing at least seven different cultural developments. While these seem to slow up the story, they are all part of the threads necessary for the final weaving of his resolution.

The book is not for the blood-and-action readers. But in a quiet way it is a rich and good book.

URSULA K. LE GUIN has established herself as a fine craftsman and a good writer in both fantasy and science fiction. Her novels that culminated in *Left Hand of Darkness* were superb science fiction with a heavy social structure. A novelet on cloning was excellent hard science and psychology. And her Earthsea novels have developed a fantasy world with consistency and logic.

Now she seems to have turned to a different type of writing. *The Lathe of Heaven* (Scribners, \$4.95) is a sort of "anything goes" science fantasy, laid in what may be the present, on Earth. It involves psi power and alternate futures for its basic gimmicks. Unlike anything else I can remember by her, this novel gives the feeling that it was planned as it grew, rather than

being carefully laid out in her mind before writing. This may well not be the case—when a reviewer discusses a writer's methods he's usually wrong. But the book gives that impression.

George Orr is picked up as an addict after a horrible dream. He admits using more than his quota of drugs, but explains that he does not dare to sleep because he is afraid to dream. When he dreams hideous things happen—not only in his nightmares but in the “real” world around him. He's sent to a psychologist, whom he tells that his problem began when he made a relative vanish by dreaming of her removal. In the psychologist's office he changes a picture on the wall under hypnosis. The psychologist remembers how it was before—the first time anyone but Orr has remembered that things weren't always the same.

The psychologist decides to gain the ability for himself. He forces Orr to dream, deliberately managing to get him to make changes.

Orr tries to escape and dreams all the more. Now each change he makes in the environment produces a higher status for the psychologist—until he has absolute power over Orr. Meaning to escape, Orr dreams up a world where a holocaustic war rages. He then has to unite mankind, thus creating a

world where aliens are attacking. A third effort produces an alien invasion and finally the invading aliens are changed into misunderstood—and ununderstandable—aliens who come to teach us the good life, whatever that is—and to run such things as second-hand shops.

By now this very promising idea becomes murky. A girl who was helping Orr has come and gone, changed character and station and generally become so muddled in the reader's mind that she is only a name. And the aliens, once introduced, seem impossible to get rid of—they give him help of a sort, but not much. The story has changed in midstream with the changes in the world until there seems no order to it.

In the end, with wonder piled on wonder, the plot simply loses credibility.

Unlimited fantasy has one inherent danger—when anything can happen at any time nothing can happen that will create suspense. And after the first half of this book reading it becomes a mechanical chore.

I SUPPOSE it is a mark of the acceptance of science fiction that our reference books are being taken out of the hands of fans and

published by professional reference organizations. But it seems to me that we've had too damned much acceptance and not enough understanding by the late-comers.

Some years ago Walter Cole brought out an index to anthologies that was a labor of love—it must have taken a great deal of time for which he could never hope to gain even minimal reward. It was a valuable book and despite a few trifling and inevitable errors, an accurate one.

Now Frederick Siemon has brought forth *Science Fiction Story Index, 1950-1968* (American Library Association, no price given). In the first place, it is grossly misnamed. The MIT Indices have a right to call themselves by such a title—since they index stories. The Siemon book indexes only works that have appeared in anthologies and collections; Siemon makes no distinction between the two types of books. And there is every mark of carelessness, disinterest in the field and disregard of accuracy.

The sources for the book are not the original work. Instead, Siemon seems to have used the *Cumulative Book Index* as his source, checking the entries under Adult Science Fiction against the publishers, editors, etc., when they would answer specifically. He lists 64 positive identifications out of 271

in the CBI for 1948-52; then states that 46 are included here. There is no evidence that he has even looked at the books to see what was in them.

The errors are sometimes ridiculous. For instance, under Fred-
éric Pohl's listing are given not only stories by him but also the titles of collections and anthologies he has edited—most of which do not contain any stories of his. In a few cases he is listed as editor—in others he is not. This is ignorance or carelessness, not a series of typographical errors.

I can understand why the ALA wanted an index. But they would have done better to find a man to do it who was familiar with the field, who had or could get the books indexed and who could tell the difference between an article and a story. It would also have helped to include somehow the different titles under which an anthology appeared, rather than have the indexer screen out such alternates.

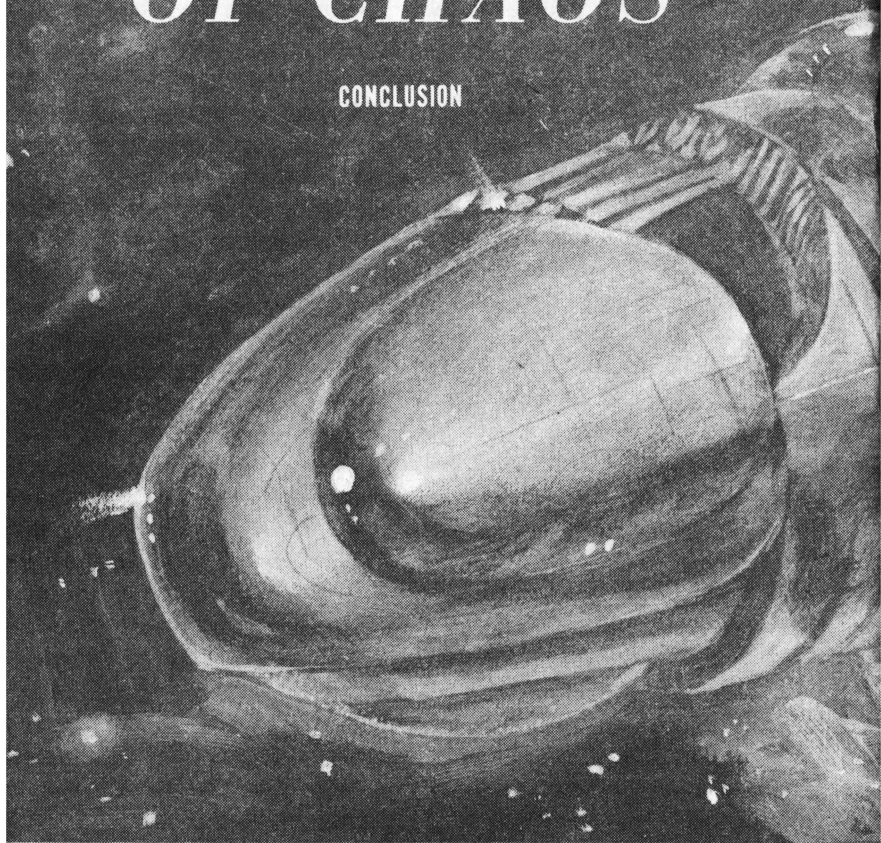
Calling Walter Cole: Please try to bring out an updated or later index. There is nothing yet to replace your work—nothing that's worth consulting.

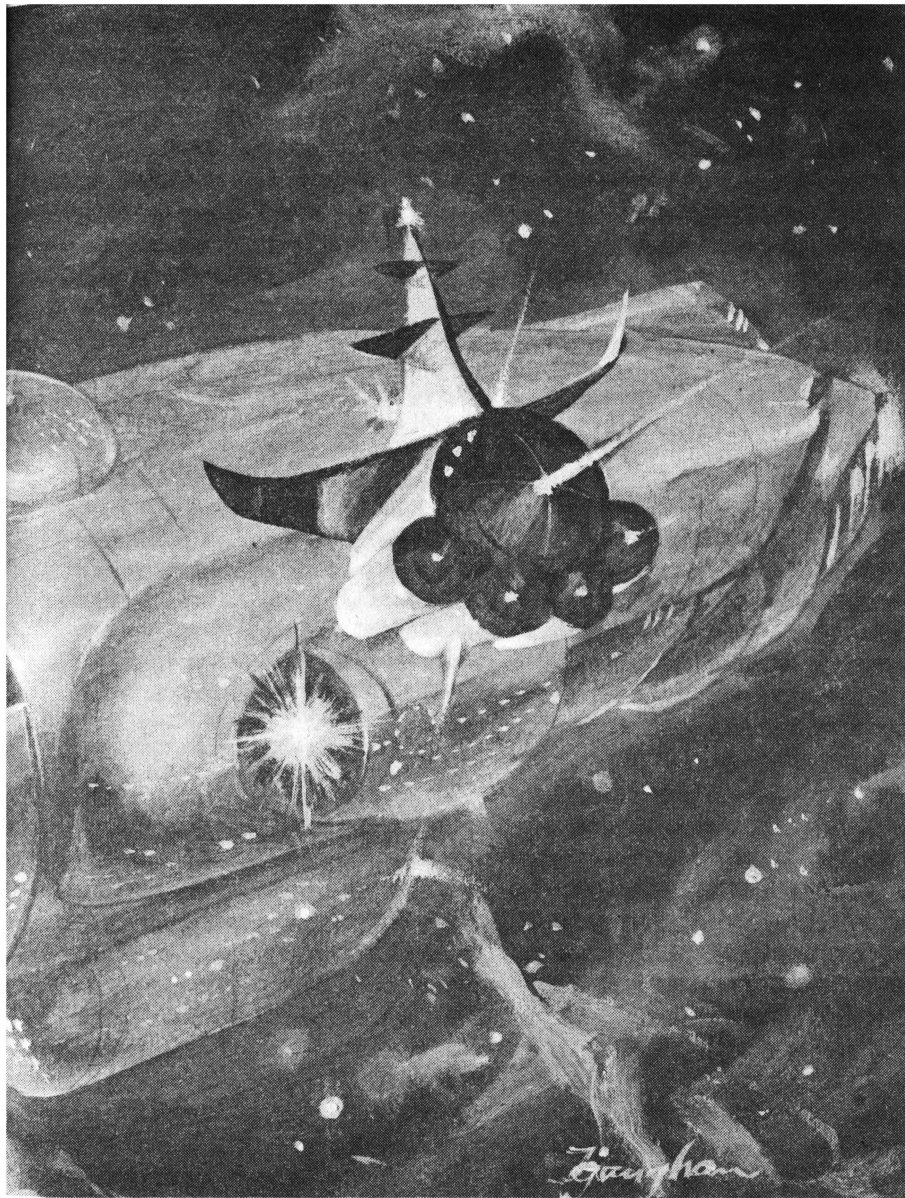
Don't worry about the lack of a stated price on the Siemon book. Whatever it costs, it isn't worth it. ●

COLIN KAPP

PATTERNS OF CHAOS

CONCLUSION





WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

BRON came out of a state of unconsciousness in a strange city on an unfamiliar planet, not knowing his name or identity, with holocaustic war raging around him. A voice in his head identified him as a Terran agent involved in Earth's struggle with the Destroyers, an outlaw federation of planets once colonized by Earth. The voice directed him to safety through Destroyer lines, told him he was in the city of Ashur on the planet Onaris, under Destroyer attack.

The voice belonged to a Special Assignments Group attached to the Stellar Commandos, an Earth military unit. It reached him through a minute electronic transfer link surgically implanted in his brain before he began his mission. The link not only enabled the Group to reach him at any time and see and hear through his senses, but also gave it life and death powers over him. The voice continued to brief him. His amnesia, caused by a concussion during the Destroyer raid on Onaris, was complicated by the fact that, before starting on his mission, he had been hypno-conditioned to represent himself as a leading Onarian scientist, Syncretist **ANDER HALTERN**, whom the Destroyers were known to be looking for on the planet.

The voice in Bron's head was sometimes that of **JAYCEE**, an

acid-tongued but attractive female commando; of **DR. VEEDER**, Group medical officer; and of **GENERAL ANANIAS**, its military member. Under the Group's direction Bron duly fell into the hands of the Destroyers and was taken aboard the enemy spacefleet's flagship, commanded by the Destroyers' leader **CANA**, who received him cordially, believing him to be **Ander Haltern**. **Cana's** lieutenant, **COLONEL MARTIN DAIQUIST**, however, suspected Bron/Haltern's credentials and subjected him to a test. With the aid of the real **Ander Haltern's** coaching through the transfer link, Bron easily passed the test and was given restricted freedom of the ship by **Cana**.

As **Cana's** "guest" Bron/Haltern witnessed—from space—the total destruction of Onaris by a "hellburner" missile, whose arrival **Cana** had accurately anticipated. The event matched the Destroyers' reputation for planetary destruction—**Cana**, however, disclaimed all responsibility. The hellburner missiles always followed Destroyer raids and were of unknown origin, according to **Cana**, and this last one had undoubtedly been intended to kill **Ander Haltern**—it had struck Onaris at exactly the spot where the Destroyers had seized Bron/Haltern.

To prove his innocence **Cana** invited Bron/Haltern, as a master syncretist and expert on the "pat-

terns of chaos"—which Cana's own scientists had used to compute the arrival of the hellburner—to check all data available on the ship. Bron/Haltern did so and also used his freedom of the ship to compute the course of Cana's fleet back to the Destroyers' baseworld—information Earth wanted and Bron transmitted to the Group via the transfer link. His activities, however, reawakened Daiquist's suspicions and he was transferred from the flagship to another vessel, the Tantalus—a former Terran laboratory ship long since captured by the Destroyers and now part of Cana's fleet.

Aboard the Tantalus Bron made a startling discovery—the ship's entire instrumentation had been exactly reversed: dials read from right to left, etc. Checking back, Bron also found that the Tantalus had once been commanded by General Ananias, who had abandoned her and presumably her crew in space. When he confronted Ananias with the information via the transfer link the latter tried to kill him. Jaycee saved Bron's life.

Under the coaching of the real Ander Haltern via the transfer link Bron/Haltern established himself as an expert on the patterns of chaos with Cana's own expert, LAARIS, who now captained the Tantalus. Studying the patterns with Laaris, Bron learned that the Tantalus was doomed to destruction via the same agency that de-

molished Onaris—a finding that tended to support Cana's theory that some mysterious force in the universe was determined to kill Bron.

Of more immediate concern to Bron, however, were his growing suspicions of General Ananias and during a transfer-link conversation with Dr. Veeder, the medical member of the Group, Bron virtually accused Ananias of treason.

X

WHAT? Veeder's wrath exploded like a bomb. *How do you compute that?*

"I memorized the subspace coordinates I got in the cavity on the other ship. I've just rerun the transposition to real-space terms. There's been no chance to consult the star catalogues yet, but I'd issue a written guarantee that the Destroyers' destination isn't within half a galaxy of Brick's World. The sector's all wrong, for a start."

Are you sure?

"Deadly sure. Ananias not only switched coordinates on the way to GenStaff, but he must have had a separate set prepared in readiness. Which brings me to the point of this conversation. However you may defend it, your Control center is the weakest link in the whole chain. I started a mission to destroy

the Destroyers, and I intend to go through with it. I have a scheme and I'm going to try it. Doc, don't stand in my way."

Regardless of circumstantial evidence, Bron, you're still under orders. I admit the things you've told me need investigating, but you're to take no action unless I say so. Do you understand?

"No. I think Ananias is using you for his own ends. Since I don't know what those ends are I'm not willing to comply."

Don't take that attitude with me, Bron. We have ways of ensuring your cooperation.

"Spool it, Doc! Don't try to pressure me. I know the range of a bio-electronic transducer. It isn't even planetary, let alone interstellar, no matter how good your pickup."

Meaning what? Veeder's voice was sharp.

"Meaning that for you to receive transmissions from me or for me to pick up from you, there has to be a local repeater amplifier somewhere close. If I smashed that I'd be free from you until I came near the next repeater."

True, Bron, true. But you'd never find it—not in a million years. Don't you know how small we can make a repeater amplifier?

"Yes," said Bron. "It was just that knowledge that told me where it was. Now do I get my own way?"

You're bluffing, Bron. Not in a million years—

Bron fingered the crucifix hanging from the chain around his neck. He brought it up to where he could see the golden cross cradled in his palm.

"Now do I get my own way?"

This could earn you a Court Martial, Bron. You know the penalty for disobedience.

"Doc, do you think that threat holds any terrors for me? Try calculating the odds against my surviving long enough to come to trial."

There was a long silence, broken only by the blood-rush static of the pulsars.

All right, Bron. You win this round. We will watch and listen, but not interfere. Give me the information you have on the coordinates.

"Here." Bron scanned the figures rapidly for the benefit of the recorders. "You can rerun your own computation if you want a cross-check. But you won't get it to indicate Brick's World. Don't bother to send any ships either. By the time they get there, there'll be nothing left for them to intercept."

I don't understand. You can't tackle a baseworld and a space-fleet single-handed.

"Just watch and listen," said Bron. "It's no accident that the

Tantalus is heading for the end of a line in chaos.”

You know I can't accept that, Bron. I have to act on this information.

“Please yourself—but the way I see it you'll never make it in time.”

BRON returned to the programmer and began to set up a new series of equations, occasionally interrogating the cosmological indices of the ship's navigation computer when he needed further information. He worked now without attempting to conceal the input and readouts, knowing that other eyes were seeing what he saw, yet would be able to determine nothing without knowing his intention.

Shortly Jaycee came back online.

Don't know what you said to Doc, but he lit out of here like somebody put rockets in his after-burners. You know you aren't goin' to get away with this rebellion, you illegitimate worm. I'll teach you not to cross me if I have to kill you in the process.

“Get off my back, Jaycee. Didn't Doc tell you to leave me alone?”

He shouted to leave you alone officially. He didn't say anythin' about my speakin'.

“If this is to be a poison-tongue session, I'd have preferred the

punishment button.”

You'd have been better advised to do so, you abortive whelp of a sex-mad she-cow. How did you ever become so lucky as to forget me?

“It's a reward for good living.”

Jaycee nearly choked on the point. *If you remembered what I remember, you wouldn't even joke about it. They don't make words to describe animals like you.*

Bron pulled the final readout from the printer and inspected it closely. Two doors from the chartroom he knew he would find Weaponry Control. It was unlikely to be manned by the skeleton crew, especially in subspace, but he would receive no quarter if the crew suspected his intention. Whether he had unconsciously subvocalized enough of his thoughts to warn Jaycee of his intention he did not know, but he heard her catch her breath sharply as he moved out of the chartroom.

The corridor was empty. Silently he slid along the wall, hoping that the door to Weaponry Control was not locked. It was not—probably an oversight during the recent exodus of technicians. He closed the door behind him and locked it securely.

When he was sure he was able to work without detection, he turned his attention to the weapon con-

trols. Even in their laterally inverted state they felt familiar to him. His fingers were guided by a surfacing recollection of past weaponry studies he could not call to mind—yet they prompted familiar reactions in an ever-increasing cascade.

He knew then that his own memory was breaking through the block as surely as the Haltern synthesis was slipping away. He ran a quick check on the state of the magazines and was thankful to find them in good order. No less than four unassembled Terran Nemesis hellburners, small in power compared with the catastrophic engines that had torn Onaris apart, were waiting in the assembly ramps. All they needed was the armorers' signal, which would bring together the components to form them into the incredibly dangerous weapons they were. His fingers keyed the assembly sequence in such a short time that he knew he must once have been tutored by a master.

THE automatic transfer of the missiles from the ramps to the firing tubes would be the most dangerous part of the operation. In the singing flight of the subspace mode the movement of such a mass within the ship was unlikely to escape the notice of the crew. With

this in mind Bron made sure that the flight program was completely set and that the missiles' motors would fire immediately on entering the tubes. Any of his instructions could be countermanded from the bridge, but he was gambling on the fact that the missiles would be away before the crew could pinpoint the precise nature of his interference.

When all was set he activated the hellburners, then thumbed every alarm and repeater button he could find in order to create a diversion. The result was the nearest approximation to complete confusion he had ever contrived. The multiple blasts of various alarms racked the ship with a cacophony of noises. Every corridor was lit by a multiplicity of action signs, and the call boards began to chime for an urgent remuster, for which the ship had no available crew.

Remaining only long enough to assure himself that the hellburners were actually spaceborne, Bron headed back to the chartroom. Soon two of the crew appeared, searching for they knew not what order of disaster. They eyed Bron suspiciously, but went on hurriedly to locate the source of the furor some two doors away. Soon the urgency of the alarm systems faded and was followed by a peaceful hiatus. Bron studied star maps

wearing an angelic expression and listening to Jaycee alternately cursing and bitching inside his head. But the tranquility could not last. The ship's men were not slow in deducing the cause of events.

Their leader was a tall and arrogant barbarian, whose mongoloid features youth made handsome in a striking way. His three companions were a mixture of races and traits that betrayed the inhomogenous blood of the Destroyer nations and their lack of cohesive ethnic groups. They were probably tenth-generation descendants of the more reckless star-travelers of the Great Exodus who had flung themselves out to the farther limbs of the galaxy to populate the new worlds and create the new federations.

"You bloody insane, you make mischief after Daiquis' warn you." The leader signaled his armed companions into position with a mere movement of his finger. They were obviously a coordinated fighting team. "Now we're goin' make mischief back. You bloody Onaris Christian—le's see you pray."

This I could enjoy, said Jaycee, with rare anticipation. *Looks as though the boys are going to treat you to a little of their own kind of chaos. Trouble with you, Bron, is you never know when to stop sufferin'.*

"Pray." The order was accompanied by a blow Bron could have avoided only at the peril of drawing fire from the weapons of the others. He took it hard and fell. A pair of metal-tipped boots in his ribs soon persuaded him that he would find it less painful to stand.

"Now pray." The mongol was jeering. "Pray to me. Pray to me for your life, Syncretis'—because it's in my hands. Daiquis' said shoot if you give any trouble—but I don't think he'll objec' if I kick you dead instead."

Try turnin' the other cheek, Bron. He might die laughin'. You don't stand any other chance. Jaycee's ecstatic titillation made him cringe.

"Damn you for a vicious whore! One day I'll—"

A fist in the stomach doubled Bron forward and dropped him to his knees. As he folded, powerful arms seized his and dragged him upright again. The leader took his time about the demolition, using calculated swings to the head and body with fists that felt as solid as bricks. Jaycee played Job's comforter in Bron's singing ears with practiced finesse and relish. Bron took as much punishment as he was able before he felt his consciousness slipping. Almost thankfully he leaned toward the enfolding blackness.

JAYCEE'S voice.

Perhaps it started as a whisper in some white wilderness . . .

The pain and the consciousness flooded back as the semantic trigger threw off the protective blackout. The mongol's eyes widened and a vicious thrust to the solar plexus made Bron scream with what little breath he still retained.

. . . a broken body, cradled in cold, cryin' futility unto a futile wind.

"Jaycee, for God's sake stop it! Let me go." He made no attempt at subvocalizing. It was as much as he could do to form the words at all. She was playing with him, deliberately using the trigger to keep him conscious so that his awareness of the torment would continue. Again and again the blows fell savagely.

. . . the mind 'mazed not by the searin' steal, the nibblin' nerve . . .

"Jaycee, in the name of pity—" He no longer cared whether he lived or died. All he wanted was release from the scientific and merciless battering his body was taking.

. . . some maimed martyr, crazed upon the cross, held up his head and cried unto the heavens: Lord, why hast thou forsaken me?

It was a full minute before he realized the punishment had stopped. Blood swam in his eyes

and dripped warmly from his chin. He was still standing, but only by virtue of the arms that held him. Somehow he forced himself to appraise the situation. Two of the Destroyer shipmen were looking at something black and white. With difficulty he identified it as the Bible from his pocket.

The leader advanced again. Bron held his breath, knowing that a few more blows, even though they might not render him unconscious, must certainly fatally injure him even if they stopped short of his death. But the blows never came. Through one eye he was astounded to see that the mongol's face held a look of admiration.

"J.C.," he said. "Jesus Chris'. I seen many men killed by less beat-in' than that. All of them wen' out whimperin'. But you still pray. I don' know abou' church, but i' make you bloody tough man. Wish you were fight on my side. You bloody indestructible."

Dimly Bron discerned that they dragged him from the chartroom and even more dimly he felt a couch like an ocean of softness thrust beneath him. He was only partly conscious of the washing and the cool salve they heaped on his tortured flesh. But the one thing that burned in his consciousness before the blackness closed around him was the voice of Jaycee a million parsecs

deep within his head saying, *That's only a sample of the tricks I can play on you, Bron. I'll teach you to get so lucky as to forget about me!*

HÉ AWOKÉ in an unfamiliar cabin, sensing that someone had just left the room, but unable to explain the reason he thought this to be so. Not until the aroma of baked meats from a hot tray caught his nostrils was his suspicion confirmed.

Wincing with the pain of movement he thrust himself off the couch and staggered toward a wall mirror. There the bruised and broken flesh of his face formed merely a setting for the deep and haunted eyes that looked back at him from under swollen lids. He made his way back to the couch and sat examining the contusions on his body while trying to force the brittle meats past his damaged lips. Finally he resigned himself to the pain and dared to drink the hot, salt beverage he found at the trayside.

The food and the self-discipline needed to consume it rallied his spirits somewhat and he was finally prepared to meet the day.

"Jaycee?"

No. Veeder on-line. Jaycee's off doing whatever it is she does when you get her worked up that high.

"Spare me the naive approach,

Doc. I'm feeling anything but trusting this morning. That must have been quite a party last night. Haven't felt like this since the morning after the last Christmas in Europa. Why did they let me live?"

I suggest two reasons. One—the Destroyers have an immense respect for strength and endurance. The punishment you took could easily have killed a man without your physique and training. Two—I suspect they haven't yet discovered the hellburners are missing. They returned all the controls in Weaponry to normal, walked out and locked the door. Being shipmen and not weapons men, they never thought to check the magazines. I don't know what you were attempting to do there, Bron, but you certainly paid for it.

"I'd have paid a lot less if it hadn't been for that hellvixen in my head."

They'd probably have killed you, said Doc sagely. It was your fortitude and some lucky phrasing that saved you. I think you can thank Jaycee for your still being alive. We checked your new coordinates and you were right. The transposition gives us a primary and five-body system location which is only just in the advanced indices. A perfect setting for a baseworld, one we wouldn't ever have hit by chance. GenStaff has orderd the entire

space fleet into the area. Estimated time is approximately one hundred sixty hours from now.

The conversation was interrupted by the entry of the mongol shipman. He grinned at the sight of Bron's injured features and ruefully examined his own knuckles.

"You bloody head like rock," he commented sociably. He threw a Destroyer uniform on to the couch. "You wear this. You no' wear bloody gown. You trained fightin' man, no' creepin' Christian. I know."

This time Bron saw no point in refusal. The uniform was an excellent fit. The cut of the cloth accented his build and the width of his shoulders. The mongol, whose name was Maku, eyed him with some respect.

"You make damn fine Destroyer, bloody sure. Could use you any time I fight."

Bron said nothing. The shipman's understanding of him was intuitive and could not be dispelled by carefully chosen words. The charade was breaking down.

THIRTY-FIVE hours later the *Tantalus* dropped out of subspace for the last time, well clear of the limits of the solar system. The Lab-Ship held station, waiting for the rest of the Destroyer fleet to drop into real-space for the rest of

the journey. The sight was not one Bron would forget. At one moment the *Tantalus* was a metal splint alone in the wastes of space. Then, one by one, the rest of the fleet materialized about her without warning and without other obvious effect.

The arbitrary point of subspace dropout in relation to the nearest primary would not affect Commando calculations much. A swift survey of the planets in the system would soon reveal the few that could be considered life-supporting. From there on identification would be swift and the retribution massive. Within days this area of space would become the mustering point for one of the largest avenging fleets of all time. Wherever Cana's ships went, the slight gravitational distortion trails they left would soon betray their passing to a thousand detectors and lead like a silken thread to the planet on which the Destroyers had homed. Curiously enough, Bron felt the avengers would probably be too late.

The subspace song was replaced by the thunderous vibration of the gravity drive as the *Tantalus* moved with its fellows. Although the shipmen were now busily concerned with navigation and the slow interjuggling as the overall command assigned orbit stations,

they were never too busy to depute one of their number to shadow Bron as insurance against further mischief. Bron did not mind. He had no immediate plans and his relationship with the crew had grown almost cordial. Knowing the retribution he had placed in their wake, he felt almost sorry that such unquenchable characters as these were going to have to die.

He was sleeping when the final maneuvering diverted the *Tantalus* out of the fleet formation to a position well apart from the others. It was perhaps the cessation of the thundering gravity drive and its replacement by nothing but ship noises and the infinite silence of space that broke the depth of his slumber and threw him into an active dream state.

He lay no longer on the couch, but on a cushion, something as yielding yet as softly supporting as a woman's breast or the lining of a womb. He was moving, traveling on a dark, irresistible tide toward some terrible genesis. He could feel the motion plainly, the halt and turn of eddy and wash. He was conscious of unknowable pressures forcing him along, a peristaltic bulge cocooning his individuality, yet carrying him remorselessly onward.

There were noises, glutinous, coagulant, semiliquid sounds sug-

gesting vexatious geese being drowned in a slow torrent of treacle. The sounds broke and foamed around his head, a frantic, frothy psalm, a submerged and harrowing hymn to halt the unalterable. And over all was the terrifying sense of doom, a great block of oppression like a ceiling of living lead.

Again he was making the journey down the awful subterranean tunnel. Again his intangible raft responded to ripple and eddy and he was able to sense clearly the dark and tortured path of the abysmal stream. As he encountered each dreaded curve he was possessed by the profound fear that this particular deviation would be the last. Somewhere ahead he knew with unreasoning certainty he would come to the end. At last the way would open out into some atrocious cavern and he would be borne, exposed and defenseless, into the presence of a reality he was completely unprepared to face.

Anticipation filled him with a nameless horror, begetting a rising panic that was enhanced by repetition of its threatened imminence. And ever the liquid goose-mutter grew louder, more antagonistic, more agonized, more urgent, and more afraid. The babble was rising to a crescendo that threatened to force out sanity and replace it with

something more alienly strange and fearsome than any delirium of madness.

The blast of a trimming jet close-by shattered the nightmare and broke him out of his sleep. As consciousness returned he sized up the situation and threw himself from the couch to the hard reality of the floor. He fell heavily, but actually welcomed the pain as a blissful alternative to his terrible wanderings. But though the visions fled, the goose-mutter remained unmistakable now as a background to the star static and the carrier hiss of the transfer-link transmissions that were ever in his brain.

XII

“**D**OC? Jaycee? There’s that noise again on the transfer link.”

It’s neither of them, little soldier. They aren’t here.

“Ananias? I thought you weren’t allowed near the boards.”

There are ways and means. Doc is apparently suffering from something that got into his coffee and Jaycee ditto from something in her alcohol. Since I happened to be on hand I thought I’d use this moment to come to a little understanding with you.

“I already have an understanding. You’re a misbegotten, un-

principled bastard, whose time is very definitely up the moment I get within throttling distance.”

What a great thing it must be to have a defective memory, Bron. As I recall it, there used to be two misbegotten, unprincipled bastards and you were the more misbegotten, the more unprincipled of the pair. One might even say I owe my success directly to your malign influence. However, I didn’t come here to swap compliments. I want to give you a warning.

“Jet off, Ananias. Nothing you can say is going to make the slightest difference.”

But it must. You don’t remember it—but there was a plan behind all this. By God and guesswork it might still come off. But it won’t if you persist in flying off at odd tangents on your own. Undoing those Brick’s World coordinates was the stupidest stunt you ever pulled.

“That must have taken quite some explaining, Ananias. Very inconvenient for you.”

That’s nothing compared to the damage you may have caused. My one hope is that the Commando Spacefleet won’t be in time to catch any significant portion of the Destroyer task force. Why the hell don’t you leave well alone?

“What are you up to, Ananias? I don’t know what you’re aiming

at, but it certainly isn't the success of the Commando operation."

Jupiter! Ananias was disgusted. You're so far out of orbit it just isn't true. I'd be tempted to hit the murder button and start out afresh if you weren't such a powerful catalyst. I'm warning you, Bron, just play things as they come and don't start injecting any of your own chaos into the situation. If you attempt to foul things up again I'm going to have to stop you—even if it means blowing the whole thing wide open. Since you don't appear to remember much, I'll leave you with something to think about. Do you know precisely who cooked up those false subspace coordinates? You did. It took a twisted little brain like yours to work out that particular deception. And why? Because if those two fleets meet head-on they'll annihilate each other. And what the hell will we do then?

Bron fell silent, wrestling with the wrongness of Ananias's words and unable to equate them to the situation as he knew it. He needed time to think. There was some activity going on near the central spacelock. Equipment was being readied in preparation for a ship docking. He stood and watched, impressed by the smooth cooperation and coordination of the Destroyer crew. These men obviously

lived in space and knew it for the dangerous and relentless enemy it was. They were tough, uncompromising and thoroughly trained.

With a frown Bron realized that if these formidable Destroyers were to engage in battle with the Stellar Commando fleet nobody was going to win. It would not be a one-sided mopping-up operation. It would be a major running battle that would continue until one side or the other had been irrevocably beaten. And the few ships that limped home would be only the remnants of two of the most powerful fighting fleets in history.

Ananias's viewpoint made sense only if one took the view that the continuance of any spacefleet—even the Destroyers'—was better than no fleet at all. If one considered some common enemy . . . The sudden flare of goose-mutter in his head caused him to pause. And in that instant there fell across his memory the image of seven alien cylinders falling on Onaris from a distance of better than six hundred thousand parsecs and seven hundred million years of time. His mind spun at the immensity of his conclusion.

"Ananias, I—"

No answer.

"Ananias?"

Again no answer. The transfer-

link board had been abandoned and for the first time since the inception of the mission Bron was utterly alone.

So concerned was he at his loss that he missed the beginning of some new phase aboard the ship. He was aware suddenly of a hardening of the men's manner toward him, a certain wariness untypical of their previous relationship. He guessed that some instruction about him had been received by radio and that he was now to be regarded as a dangerous prisoner rather than as the faintly amusing academic syncretist. Nobody immediately interfered with his liberty, however, and he was permitted to watch the docking maneuver as a trim, able-looking planetary ferry coupled with the *Tantalus's* hull.

But once the ship-to-ship coupling had been made and the final abandonment of the *Tantalus* had begun in earnest, he was no longer left in doubt of his position. The tall mongol approached, directed a handgun at Bron's stomach. While he held unwavering aim he directed his comrades to attach wrist irons to restrict Bron's hands behind his back and leg irons to confine his walking. A pad of a pungent somnific drug was held against his nose. Although he struggled not to inhale, he was unable to resist. Gradually Bron lost

consciousness, slipped to the deck.

Maku regarded the fallen figure with something akin to regret.

"You no damn Christian. You damn fine fightin' man, bloody sure. Hope Cana goin' to look after you, 'cos Daiquis', him bloody insane." He looked back at his colleagues. "This a good man. Don' matter abou' which side you're fightin'—good man is all the same. The side you fight for is matter where you were born. The man you fight with is matter of choosin' sympathies. Damn sure him dead if he goes down in tha' uniform."

He kicked the prostrate form affectionately. "Bron 'altern, you no right to go to 'ell in chains. But right now we got to get you out of 'ere. This ship damn sure is set for destruction, an' Cana wants to make sure you don' go with 'er."

BRON awoke in a cell. His wrist and leg irons had been removed and with them the Destroyer uniform. While he slept somebody had carefully clad him in a clean, white gown and in his pocket the Bible hung with reassuring weight. The pallet on which he lay was undoubtedly planetbound, lacking the minute vibrations that characterized a shipborne berth.

For a few seconds he lay collecting his faculties before he hurled

himself from the pallet in a frenzy of concern.

"Jaycee! Doc! Ananias! Somebody answer me."

The cell looked out through a small glazed slit to a gray-tiled corridor. The thickness of the door limited his field of view, but nobody was in sight outside.

"Jaycee, where the hell are you? Antares—if you have a monitor on this link, please call Control. This is an emergency—"

He looked around in agony for some way of attracting attention from somebody. The solid door made only the barest perceptible noise when he beat on it with his hands and the glazing in the slit effectively stifled his attempts to shout down the corridor.

"Jaycee—for God's sake—"

He heard a light groan over the goose-mutter and native mush of the transfer link.

Weapin' demons! You aren't in the market for a planet-sized hangover, are you?

"Snap out of it, Jaycee. I've got to get hold of Ananias—"

You've got to get hold of Ananias? Jaycee was incredulous. Bron, I've got first claim on gettin' hold of Ananias—and when I do you won't hear a thing for the screamin'. That Godlost runt put somethin' in my drink.

"Damn your dipsomaniac mis-

fortunes. Do as you're told. And get hold of Doc and tell him he's got to stop the spacefleet. We've all made a ghastly mistake."

He'll need a bit more reason than that to stop them now.

"Find him and I'll give him a reason. If those two fleets get together they'll wipe each other out."

Don't tell me you're gettin' cold feet just because you're sittin' at the center of the action?

"Jacee, I'm a dead man either way. But I just realized we're fighting the wrong enemy."

Meanin'?

"That Cana was exactly right when he said he didn't put that hellburner down on Onaris. He doesn't have that sort of weapons capability any more than we do. That thing was alien and it came in out of the void with pinpoint precision to kill a planet of two hundred million people. Whatever creatures sent it in—it and the other thirty-five we've blamed on the Destroyers—they're the real enemy. If we engage Cana's fleet now we cripple both fleets and leave the galaxy wide open clear through to Terra."

If there are any aliens—what makes you think they're comin'?

"I can hear them over the transfer link. And they're the reason Cana had to build a strong Destroyer fleet."

Not agreed, Bron. Cana built that fleet to strengthen his opposition to Terra.

"Cana doesn't give a damn about Terra or the Stellar fleet. Try to look at it through his eyes. If he had a weapon like the Onaris hellburner he could have put it straight down on Terra and forgotten about the Stellar Commando. He wouldn't have needed a major spacefleet in order to do it."

Point made, Bron. I'm puttin' out a red-alert call for Doc and Ananias. I don't think you'll convince Doc—and you haven't convinced me—but you do rate a hearin'.

"I rate more than that, Jaycee. I'm right—and you know it."

That's Doc's decision. Meantime, Bron, you're still actin' under orders. Don't try and break away again or I'll have to bring you back into line.

"I can't wait, Jaycee. I've got to warn the Destroyers to get their ships away from here. We don't dare let their fleet be destroyed. They're the only force already prepared and waiting for the aliens."

I can't permit you to move, Bron. Not until we see Doc's reaction on the spacefleet. He may decide we still attack.

"I wasn't talking about the threat from the Stellar fleet. I'm talking about a piece of chaos I cooked up

on the *Tantalus* when I thought the spacefleet wasn't going to get here."

Why? What the hell have you done? Jaycee's voice was as hard as diamond.

"Done? Jaycee, I arranged the destruction of this whole planetary system."

Spool the drama, Bron. You didn't have the hardware for that sort of action.

"**I** DID, Jaycee. I had the hellburners—I fired them from *Tantalus* in subspace. I precalculated their subspace drop-out position and programed their subluminal trajectory from there. They're due to arrive on target very soon now."

There's still no panic. Four Nemesis hellburners won't touch a spacefleet in orbit. They won't do more than blacken a couple of continents.

"They can if you use them right. It isn't just the baseworld that's going to go—but everything on the three inhabitable planets of this system."

Stop tryin' to pressure me, Bron. I know you're Satan incarnate, but not even you can do that with four small hellburners. Anyway, the Destroyers could see them comin'.

"Not where I sent them. On such a long approach trajectory they'd normally be detected and inter-

cepted as soon as they came within attack range. Mine weren't programmed ever to enter attack range."

"Then where the hell did you send them—into the primary?"

"No, their effect would have been negligible on a sun. But there are six planets in this system, of which this is the third. The neighbor to sunward and the one spaceward are also inhabitable, according to the Destroyer cosmological index on the *Tantalus*. But the innermost planet is too close to the sun and too dense to support life. It's half molten and extremely friable. The hellburners are programmed to go down on that."

They'll split it apart and . . . The last part of the sentence was lost as the implications of the situation swamped Jaycee's powers of credulity. *But if any substantial part of it comes out of orbit and goes sunward you'll get a flare that will sterilize the whole system.*

"If my calculations are correct," said Bron, "almost the entire mass will go sunward. I've got to warn the Destroyers to pull out. I want an FTL transmission put out at full power from Antares on the Destroyer emergency wavebands. Get me Antares on-line."

Bron, you know I can't do that without Doc's authorization—and even he'd have to clear it through GenStaff.

"There isn't that much time available. By the time GenStaff came up with a decision it would all be over."

He went to the cell door and beat on it with his hands.

"Damn it, Jaycee, if you won't warn the Destroyers I'll have to find some way to attract their attention from here."

Don't try, Bron. You're still under orders and those orders still say the Destroyers are the enemy. If you attempt to warn the Destroyers it'll be mutiny. I'll stop you by any means I have.

"Get off my back, Jaycee."

He slipped down and explored the bottom of the cell door with his fingers.

Don't try anythin', Bron. You've already jumped out of line once and had a beatin' taken out of your skin. Don't you ever learn?

"Do me a favor, Jaycee—drop dead."

A small light fixture in the ceiling attracted his attention and gave him an idea. His hand brushed the Bible in his pocket and he took it out and examined it eagerly.

Its material appeared excellently flammable. The metal bunk on which he had lain was his next objective. Fortunately it was not strongly secured to the wall. He wrenched it free.

I'm warnin' you, Bron. If you

cross me this mornin' I'll kill you. I'm in no mood for your Godlost games.

"Stay out of my hair, Jaycee. You don't dare hit the murder button and none of the others is going to stop me."

BRON lifted the bunk and smashed the protective transparent shield away from the solitary light. The light itself faltered but did not go out.

I don't know what you're up to, Bron, but quit now. I warn you I'm just in the mood to give you a taste of the punishment circuit.

"You'd enjoy that, wouldn't you, Jaycee?" Bron smashed the solid-state lamp away and the cell fell into darkness save for the dim illumination that came in through the slit in the door.

God! Enjoy it? You don't know how near I come to usin' it sometimes. Just out of—

"Spite?" With the bunk on its side and with careful balance, Bron could just about reach the small wires he had exposed in the broken lamp fitting.

Spite — revenge — hatred — I don't know what the hell you induce in me.

A careful twist of the fine paper torn from the Bible aligned in the dimness between the wires ought to kindle to a spark, Bron thought.

Another single sheet would give him scant protection against the current, but he dared not use more in case he damped the arc. There would probably be only one chance before the circuit protectors cut the current.

Bron, I'm warnin' you . . .

"Why don't you press the button, Jaycee? If it'll really give you satisfaction." Under his fingers the spark flared briefly but enough for ignition. A flame leaped up between his fingers as the dry paper caught fire. He jumped carefully down from the edge of the bunk and began to pile page on separated page on the small fire he was making on the floor.

Oh God, Bron—the urges you rouse in me—

Bron successfully transferred a blazing sheet of paper to the door and pushed it under. He had no means of knowing whether the flame survived, but he fed more sheets beneath the door and hoped at least for smoke to stir some alarm system into operation.

"Press that button, Jaycee, you vindictive bitch. If you dare. I'd be interested to know what it does—to both of us."

Prepared as he was, the pulse of pain that hit him was far greater than he had imagined possible. Almost every sensory nerve in his body seemed to contribute to the

pillar of corroding agony that possessed him. Even when the pulse was gone he lay for a full half-minute trying to erase the memory of those seconds. When he tried to speak his vocal cords were taut and the words would not come out.

But he did not need to speak. Jaycee's near hysteria came through clearly against the background of goose-mutter and the blood-rush of the pulsars. He decided ruefully that those thirty seconds had cost Jaycee quite as much as they had cost him. Her distraught voice flared in his head.

*. . . you contaminate me, Bron.
You twist everythin' that's in me.
Damn you—damn you . . .*

When the second pulse of pain began he knew from the sobbing that her finger was going to hold that button down for a long, long time. Perhaps until Doc or Ananias came and pulled it off. Fortunately she was too distressed to think of using the semantic trigger this time and mercifully he passed out where he lay.

XIII

HE CAME around spluttering. The Destroyers had thrown water in his face. He was no longer in the cell, but on the floor of some

kind of communications room ringed with consoles. Daiquist, his face full of thunder, stood astride him, looking down. Cana stood to one side, his powerful intellect still striving to come to terms with the full implications of the situation. Bron struggled to his feet, puzzled by the open accusation in their eyes.

Daiquist swore. He said, "I admire your nerve, but this is the last trick you'll ever pull. And to think we carried you out from Onaris—" Words failed him, as if some yet unexplained glimpse of Bron's deception were a revelation greater than he could express.

"I don't understand you." Desperately Bron tried to maintain his cover, but he knew instinctively that his cause was lost. Yet how? Why? Daiquist's suspicions had hardened to a certitude, but the factor responsible for Bron's suddenly altered status was not apparent.

"What the hell's gone wrong, Jaycee?" Subvocally.

Ananias has sold you out, Bron— Her voice was dull and leaden. The sentence continued, but Bron was no longer listening to the words. He knew all too suddenly what had gone wrong. As well as coming from the transducers in his head, Jaycee's voice was issuing over the Destroyer's loudspeakers.

Daiquist's smile was a mixture of triumph and malice.

"Now, Syncretist—do you still fail to understand what I'm talking about? You and that on-line Commando bitch? We've learned quite a lot about you in this last half-hour. So she wants you to suffer? Well there I can certainly oblige. You're going to suffer as nobody has ever suffered before. By the time I've finished with you I doubt if even the Stellar Commando will have stomach enough to send us another spy."

"If you were able to hear us," said Bron, "you'll know that I was trying to attract your attention. Those hellburners I sent to the first planet—you've only got hours to get away before the sunflare."

"Judging from the extent of your deception this far I suspect this as just another trick. It would be only too convenient for the Commando if we abandoned our defensive position and scattered our ships right into the face of the approaching Stellar spacefleet."

"It's no trick," said Bron. "I had no idea you could monitor our transfer link."

They didn't need to, Bron. Ananias took to space in an Intelligence radio ship. It seems he's interceptin' our transfer link and rebroadcastin' it throuh Antares on FTL radio over the

Destroyer emergency wavebands.

Cana shot a quick look at a radio Technician at one of the consoles.

"Is that true?"

"FTL transmissions on our emergency bands, damn sure."

"It could still be a trap," said Daiquist sourly. "I'm going to take him apart the hard way. I'll make him plead to be allowed to talk."

Cana held up his hands. "No, Martin. If it is a trap—at least the Stellar spacefleet won't catch us unprepared. We can clear this system in battle formation and meet them on equal terms. But my instinct tells me there's no trickery involved."

"How do you arrive at that conclusion?"

"Because the chaos patterns predict the destruction of the *Tantalus*. You heard where the Syncretist said he had directed the Nemesis hellburners. Now tell me what you've done with the *Tantalus*?"

"It's abandoned in orbit around the first planet."

"And can you think of a more probable catastrophe that can happen to it than the one he has described?"

"No—" Daiquist's face expressed the measure of his agonized indecision. "But I still think I'd better take him—"

"Don't you understand?" Cana turned on him the full force of the personality that held a whole federation of rogue planets to heel. "Martin—if the Syncretist is right, we'll all be dead before you get your answers."

"Then just let me kill him. I don't fancy going into battle with the enemy having a direct intelligence link in our midst. Regardless of what the patterns say we've already taken chances enough."

"No, Martin. I can't permit it—and you know my reasons." Cana turned to Bron. "I've got the greatest reservations about you, Commando or syncretist, whichever you may be. The only reason you're still alive is that whichever way we plot the patterns of chaos we always seem to find you at the causal focus of some of the most aggressive waves. Apparently you're the catalyst calculated to initiate some of the most violent entropic upheavals the universe has ever known. So answer me this, Bron Haltern, or whoever you may be—just how do you intend to take up the cosmos and twist it by the tail?"

A sudden clatter came from one of the monitoring consoles and an operator cried out in surprise.

"The *Tantalus*, sir. She 'ave stopped transmittin'. I think she bloody destroyed."

CANA looked at Daiquist sharply. "Can you still doubt the patterns, Martin? That's the hellburner's strike on the first planet. It could take hours for the fragments to reach the surface of the sun, but the consequent sun-flare will only take minutes to reach us. Order an emergency evacuation."

"I still think it's a trick."

"Trick or not, can you still doubt the Syncretist's ability to influence events on a cosmological scale?"

Daiquist was growing angry. "Look, Cana, what's to stop me from shooting him where he stands? If I put a shot through him now, what of the patterns then?"

"An interesting speculation, Martin. Since his effectiveness is already included in the patterns, either you will be prevented from touching him or we should gain first-hand knowledge of resurrection. Either way offends my materialistic dignity, so I forbid you to try. I'll take him with me to the flagship, while you organize the evacuation. We have a system to lose and a fleet to save, so there's no use in arguing now."

With bad grace Daiquist turned to the radio operator at the console.

"Order a general alarm. All personnel to return to their ships

and all ground staff to remuster for emergency evacuation. All ships to be placed in battle readiness fourteen system diameters out. This is a prime emergency and there will be no repeat of this instruction."

Daiquist moved across the room, now shouting detailed orders. Cana looked at Bron sagely.

"Well, Syncretist, do I take you in chains or do I have your word that you will attempt no further mischief? In any case I ought to know your Commando rank."

"I can give you neither. First, I'm still on active service under control of Commando Central. Therefore I can give you no personal assurances. Second, I've forgotten my rank along with most other details of my personal life."

"Then perhaps your mentor would be so good as to supply the information?"

He's Commander Bron, of the Commando Central Intelligence Bureau, supplied Jaycee dully.

Cana's eyes widened appreciably and he smiled as if at some old memory. "Ah yes! I might have guessed. Tell me, Commander, does she hear me through you?"

"Not only hears you—she can also see you."

"Remarkable." Cana's eyes instinctively searched Bron's head but learned nothing of the trans-

ducers buried deep into the skull. "I had underestimated the Commandos both for their technology and for the class of men they produce. Nevertheless I shall still have to think of you as Haltern the Syncretist, because that is undoubtedly the catalytic role you have to play. Shall we go?"

ESCORTED only by Cana's aides, they went through a door and were suddenly in the open air, standing in a pale-gray light of what Bron took to be early dawn. Looking about him, he could see nothing but a stretch of sparsely vegetated wasteland stretching as far as the eye could reach. The air was damp and chill and inhabited by a forlorn sense of loneliness—the antithesis of what he would have expected from a Destroyer baseworld. Only the cleaved rock of the buildings they had just left suggested the works of man.

Initially he was perplexed by the barren outlook. Then his estimate of the pale sun sharpened when he saw the height of its position. He knew then that this parody of winter was all the noon this blighted place was going to get. Nobody would build a base-world in a place so inhospitable and where the ecology was so starved of the essential energy for photosynthesis. The more he

thought about it, the more obvious the situation became. The Destroyer flesh-ships had not been making directly for their baseworld, after all. They had needed to unload their cargoes of flesh upon whatever world they had chosen to be worked. This was a mere colony world—a labor camp for the thousands of slaves who were to have been tossed upon its barren soils to work out their lives under a sparse and alien sun.

Men were cheaper than machines for initial colonization. They were more easily obtained, more versatile. They had the gift of self-duplication, which was not a feature of mechanisms, and, though vastly less efficient, they could be made to perform any labor a machine could do. It mattered little how many of them died in the fields, since a nurtured nucleus could always be used for breeding further stock. Thus, in the broadest economic sense, mankind had even yet triumphed over automation. Machines cost money and skilled attention: slaves cost no more than their transportation and the cost of the whips to drive them to the fields.

Bron felt suddenly sick. It was upon this gray wraith of a world that he had called down a vengeance to end all vengeance. The Destroyer fleet was still in

orbit and the only craft visible were ferries. With the great spacefleet above preparing for battle with the approaching Commando fleet, it was a certainty that the hapless Onarian slaves would be hastily dumped on the planet's surface to await the ordered coming of the sunflare that would sterilize the planet and everything that remained upon it.

HE WAS aware that Cana was studying him closely and he wondered if the great Destroyer's intellect could extend to an appreciation of his captive's thoughts at that moment. If it did, Cana showed no sign. His features were hard with the granite resolution of a man who had been forced to perform impossible tasks and had even more impossible tasks yet to perform. It was the face of a man whose visions were cosmic in content.

Dotted about the far fields were the blunt ferry ships which formed the planetary link with the orbiting spacefleet. Around them a score of scudders swarmed like gnats, fetching and carrying services and personnel, hovering uncertainly, then darting swiftly to their destinations as the message of urgency spread among them. Occasionally new ferries would land and others

depart. Groups of bewildered Onarian slaves were being driven to the wasteland and the ships refilled with Destroyer land crews hastily called back to join the battle fleet.

Many long and anxious glances were directed toward the gray myth of a sun that might suddenly redden and expand to the dreaded sunflare. For one terrible moment this sad, pale world would know a summer more splendid than anything in its history. But accompanying the warmth and the light would come the bands of radiation and the increasing heat that would dry the seas, scorch the land and finally melt even the stubborn rocks for many kilometers down. Its happening was a predictable certainty, but the timing of the event was a matter about which nobody could be precise.

Bron, too, was possessed by a rising measure of concern—as if the cataclysmic nature of the impending doom held a psychological weighting that transcended his purely personal fear of death. His attention was drawn by a burst of activity as a new ferry landed nearer than the rest. Seven open-topped scudders, flying low with a deafening scream of engines, dropped in formation across the wasteland and halted only meters away.

Cana motioned to Bron to climb aboard one of the craft, then turned back to look for Daiquist. He waited several minutes, looking alternately at his watch and at the sun, while a scudder pilot made frantic efforts to establish contact with Colonel Daiquist over the radio. Cana and Bron were joined by an increasing number of Destroyer personnel evacuating the nearby buildings. As each scudder became loaded to capacity Cana waved it away, indicating his preference to wait for a later craft. Since Bron was already seated in a scudder he found himself in a knot of anxious shipmen being whirled to a waiting ferry well in advance of Cana's own transport.

Clad as he still was in the white robe and moreover, the known author of the current crisis, Bron could well have expected a high degree of antagonism from the Destroyers in whose company he had been thrown. Instead he encountered the respect due a high-ranking Destroyer officer. Steps were provided to enable him to dismount from the scudder when the ferry was reached and on the vessel itself his safety harness was made ready for him.

After a seeming eternity the ferry lifted off, climbing rapidly under the hands of a skilled crew, confident even in an emergency. The

docking with the mother ship was precise and Bron had the feeling that he had never seen similar action performed more professionally by any Commando crew.

A COURIER was waiting to take him to the ship's bridge. Cana arrived there at about the same time. Almost immediately the ship began to throb with the overall thunder of the main gravity drive. The energy with which the drive was applied suggested that the ship's departure from its orbital station was a matter of crash urgency. Cana thrust him near one of the great navigational viewscreens and Bron could see precisely what the urgency was.

He caught his breath as he gained a comprehension of the awesome sight. The scanners were trained on the sun upon which the little gray world had depended. But this sun was sparingly benevolent no longer. Broadly across its center spread a sunstorm of such frightening intensity that, even viewed from the ship's present distance of better than a hundred million kilometers, its ferocity seemed to threaten to engulf all. But the boiling, granulated ferment of the storm was nothing compared to the astonishing outrush of the flaming, eruptive prominences, spreading probably at a tenth of

the speed of light like fantastic, feathered nuclear flames. The whole sun appeared to contract and then to swell and to belch out its infinitely hotter interior fires with such hellish virulence that the scanners had repeatedly to attenuate their reception of the scene in order to compensate for the spiteful increases in luminosity. And as the pulsing brilliance increased, so the feathered fingers of the sunflare fled farther and farther out into the massive volumes of space.

It was impossible for Bron to judge the scale at which the boiling ebullition was portrayed, but the scanners panned repeatedly away from the initial scene in order to contain the rapid progress of the flare as it spread across the system. In advance of the visible extension, the vast increases in cosmic and ultraviolet radiation must already have punished the shielding atmospheres of the inhabitable planets beyond endurance. Even in this short time the second world must have become an irradiated hell. The third planet, which Cana had only just abandoned, must be under such a bombardment from the skies that life outdoors would be impossible and life indoors meant slow and certain death from the effects of primary and secondary radiation. The rapidity of the

cataclysm far exceeded anything Bron had imagined.

Occasionally the scanners picked up images of Destroyer ships, remote splinters of darkness against the brilliance of the spreading holocaust. Each ship was engaged in a long, forced trajectory its command hoped would clear it of the planetary system and take it to a point beyond the corrosive fingers of the enraged sun.

THE scanners swooped down to concentrate in detail on the third planet. The groan of anguish was audible. Seven Destroyer ships were still in orbit and most probably would remain so. Bathed in such a concentration of deadly radiation, it was certain that even their magnificent shielding could not prevent the destruction of their crews.

From somewhere on the surface a ferry staggered into the sky, then lost control and, its drive still raging, nosed down again in a horrifying power dive to the planet's surface. Cana called for more detailed views and one by one the orbiting ships were scanned and identified. None of the trapped ships betrayed any possibility of being able to move and only a little more time would ensure their complete sterilization. One day, perhaps, it would be possible

to reclaim the vessels. For the men who had taken the ships to the far corners of the galaxy there was no hope at all.

Cana's flagship, *Skua*, fled well in advance of the grasping radiation fingers and soon the thundering urgency of the gravity drive relaxed to a normal pitch. But Cana himself signaled no such relaxation. His quiet anger still ran with a tide of energy frightening to behold. He called repeatedly for figures and data on the ships that got away—and on the ones left behind. Finally he turned to Bron with a wrath that seethed like a cauldron only a hair's breadth beneath the surface of his iron composure.

"Do you know what you've done to me, Syncretist? You've cost me three inhabitable planets, at least seven ships, better than a thousand men—and Martin Daiquist." He paused for a moment as words seemed to fail him. Then he continued, again fighting to prevent his anger from breaking surface.

"One man, a bloody book and a headful of bio-electronics. Zeus! No wonder the patterns of chaos treat you with such respect. If this is what you can achieve as a prisoner—I shudder to think what could happen to the universe if they gave you a fleet."

He turned his head sorrowfully in the direction of the screens now filled by a swollen and distorted sun which had been provoked into destroying the satellite planets it had nurtured for so many millennia. "First I have to ensure my fleet is safe. Come to my cabin in an hour, Syncretist. We shall have a great deal to talk about." He walked away, calling for a conference of ships' captains and cursing the communications men who were fighting a losing battle with fierce electrical storms in an effort to maintain vital radio links in the face of an angered star.

Bron lingered by the screens, still overwhelmed by the enormity of the havoc he had caused. Destruction on such a colossal scale using only four small Nemesis hellburners had been possible only because the perverse genius of his own mind had given him an idea that had magnified the normal potential of the weapons a millionfold or more. But he was not alone in appreciating his own talents for violent destruction. Somehow the dark entropic echoes of even more violent things he had yet to do were already throbbing their way through the continuum. He was facing a pre-destiny so immense in its effects that his assassination on Onaris had been

ordered seven hundred million years ago in another island universe, far across the terrifying voids of space.

XIV

JAYCEE spoke in a quiet voice, intruding on his reverie. *Doc reckons you were lucky the sun didn't go nova, Bron.*

"Doc's back?"

He's been back for hours—replayin' the tapes and tryin' to get some answers.

"Answers to what?"

He lost out at GenStaff. They took his command away from him. They've handed the whole show over to bloody General Ananias.

"Including control of the space-fleet?"

Ananias has got the whole lot. He's now Senior Advisor to the General Staff.

"Where's Ananias now?"

Still out on the Intelligence radio ship, I guess. At least he's still interceptin' our transfer link to Antares.

"Which means he could be on-line?"

Correct, little soldier. Ananias's voice came in muffled but intelligible. Glad to see you're coming back on form. That was a piece of destruction that surpassed even your demoniac best. Trouble is, you hit at the wrong side. With you

around we don't need any enemies.

"Spool the noise, Ananias. You've got to stop the Commando space-fleet before they meet the Destroyers. Cana's fleet is battle-ready and desperate. I think they'd cut the Commandos to pieces."

Relax, Bron. Those two fleets won't get within parsecs of each other. I've already taken care of that. But my real worry is you. You've not only forgotten that there was a plan—you've even forgotten that it was your plan! Don't you remember anything?

"Bits and pieces come back when I get a thread of connecting circumstances—but the overall picture escapes me."

Then, for your information, we two were up to our necks in a plot about a kilometer thick that could have gotten us hanged a dozen times had it gone wrong. The fact that we've not yet been hanged has been due almost entirely to some very fast talking on my part. But I can't keep carrying you—nobody has a fund of luck that great. You've got to get yourself straightened out—and fast. In the meantime, don't make any major decisions without referring them to me. If you pull another crazy stunt like the last one we'll likely lose Terra as a result. Jaycee, are you there?

On-line, Ananias.

Look after this prize idiot. We're taking the radio ship into subspace and we won't be able to maintain our interception of the transfer link. If Bron moves out of line again clobber him with every correction circuit on the board. I'll call you again as soon as we clear the jump.

Engaged, Ananias. You must be feelin' very proud of yourself, you Godlostmewling. GenStaff has just confirmed their emergency decision. It seems that from this moment we're all workin' for you.

Have I ever told you otherwise, honey-bitch? Didn't I always tell you to be nicer to the boss? But don't let circumstances fool you. I could never have cooked up a scheme half as big and twisted as this has turned out to be. The real insane architect of our misfortunes is on the other end of this transfer link. If he hadn't so conveniently lost his memory, he'd tell you so himself.

ASUDDEN alteration came in the quality of the sound as Ananias cut his circuits out of the transmission. The difference made Bron more conscious of the background noises that entered his brain along with the hiss of the transfer-link carrier. He was alarmingly aware now of the increased strength of the goose-mutter. Not only was

it greater in volume—it was also more menacing in texture. The previous babble of sounds was separating into discrete components, like the tones of individual geese talking through molasses. But whatever the language and whatever the nature of the creatures who uttered them, the urgent tones of overriding panic were implicit in the sound.

The rhythmic tones of this alien invasion into his head broke like waves on a seashore—but the waves were of waterglass and the creatures who generated them were drowning in a tide that swept shores far beyond the vast resources of the human Id. He realized with horror that if this emergent sound continued to increase in volume, there must soon come a time when it would swamp the human messages over the transfer link and leave him isolated in a gulf of foaming, gelatinous babble. In order to rescue himself from these dark concerns Bron had to force himself to concentrate on his own circumstances.

“Jaycee, is Ander still available?”

On call, Bron. Do you want me to signal him?

“Urgently. I must know what a chaos catalyst is.”

Engaged, Bron. It may take a few minutes to find him. By the way, I suppose I ought to feel sorry for the

way I handed you that punishment. It was intended to make you toe the line—but I guess when you're involved as we are with each other it's almost impossible to keep your own feelin's out.

“That moment was inevitable, Jaycee, wasn't it? It had to come. Do you ever think much about our relationship?”

It's not an experience I'm likely to be forgettin', if that's what you mean.

“Ignoring the innuendo, that was roughly what I meant. It reminds me of the rapport—the mysterious marriage of minds between torturer and tortured. You're more with me—and more one with me—than would be possible in any love-love coupling. I sometimes even think you know what I'm thinking.”

I frequently do. Partly instinctively and partly because you unconsciously subvocalize a great deal of your thinkin'. You don't transmit the thoughts too clearly, but I can often pick up the emotion. You don't know how I crawl when you touch other women and I can read the conflicts in your mind.

“Crawl, Jaycee? And what other women? I haven't seen one this trip.”

They're part of what you've forgotten. And crawl is the word I mean, damn you. When your self-pity and self-hate burst out and

sour the love and the tenderness you should have for a woman, I feel I want to scream. I want to tell her—tell them all—that if they understood you as I understand you none of us would get hurt—not them and not me.

“Or me?”

That isn't implicit in the relationship, Bron. You're the sufferer and the cause of the sufferin'. That's your role. I don't care how much you suffer as long as our liaison's allowed to continue. I know I'm goin' to suffer through you regardless—and that's the fact that tells me how deeply I'm involved. Only sometimes the rapport isn't sufficient. I feel the urge to get my nails and teeth into your flesh to even up the score. I get—high—Oh, God! That's your type of chaos, Bron. Right across the universe you seem to reach out and etch bits off me.

She broke off as if interrupted. After a short period she came back again.

I've got Ander on-line, Bron. I'm leavin' him with you. Doc's takin' over the board, so if you want anythin' further he'll be available. I'm goin' out to get pickled so high I'll probably make orbit.

Another voice broke in on the transfer link. Ander speaking. You want to know about chaos catalysts?

“YES, Ander. I keep being told I am one.”

It's a fairly simple concept, Bron. You remember we established that increases or decreases in the normal rate of entropy were mainly the result of intervention by some form of intelligence such as Man's. Most individuals live their lives with very little effect on the overall pattern of entropy and therefore are not distinguishable singly. But there are a few whose influence catalyzes whole societies into new modes of action. The effective points of their lives can be traced with some precision by entropic analysis. They cause detectable chaos ripples as their activities alter the slope of entropic rise or depression. We call these individuals chaos catalysts.

“What sort of individuals are they?”

Most of the tyrants of history—and a few of the saints. A lot of fundamentally great thinkers, mainly those concerned with physical science. Almost no politicians and many, like yourself, whose innate capacity for destruction has left or will leave a permanent scar on history. The names of most of them wouldn't be familiar to you, because the judgment is based not on contemporary values but on the verified effects of the altered course of human history.

“But history has no verdict on

me," objected Bron.

Not yet. But the patterns of chaos have. If we read them forward into time we can read the violence of the effects of which you will one day be the cause. It was the intensity of your chaos effects that caused the destruction of Onaris.

"That's a bit far-fetched, isn't it, Ander?"

Unhappily, no. All those millions of years ago some intelligent life form must have read the same things in the chaos patterns and been afraid. They could have had no means of knowing what was to be the origin of those ripples, but they plotted the position in space and time so accurately that the Onaris hellburner was correct within meters and only a little late in time.

"But why pick on me?"

I suspect they were trying to avert the consequences of something you're going to do—you and the other chaos experts Cana has been collecting. But you're the prime catalyst, the main causal focus. I don't know what sort of thing you're going to do, but the shock spheres of the resultant are the most violent ever recorded.

THE clangor of the battle alarm shattered Bron's speculation and brought the ship's crew to a condition of readiness with speed

and precision. In Bron the alarm keyed half-forgotten instincts and he automatically surveyed the Skua's bridge. With an increasingly professional eye he came to recognize the various conventions of Destroyer spacewar techniques and to translate them into terms he could understand. Then he stopped, perplexed. Instinctively his eyes had gone toward the detectors and screens that should logically be the sources of warning of approaching danger.

But the screens were blank. Not one of them held a signal that could be interpreted as the cause of a battle alarm. Likewise the detectors, while straining to search the far recesses of the void, gave no clear voice to the suggestion of approaching trouble. The eyes of the crew were intent on the computer bank, whose digital signals were trimming and correcting the detection instruments as if anticipating some nemesis as yet well below the threshold limits of the apparatus.

The situation reminded Bron of the hiatus before the Onaris hellburner had come into detection range. Here was the same atmosphere of awe and expectancy—a situation that began in anticipation.

"Doc, are you there?"

On-line, Bron.

"Make sure all the recorders are

in trim. Something critical is coming up."

Engaged. By the way, do you want to give me any explanations before I have to turn my records over to the Commando Provost?

"I don't read you, Doc. What sort of charge could the Provost lay against me?"

If it's in the Criminal Indices, it'll be in the indictment.

"Try a specific summary. I haven't got much time."

Specifically, suppression of intelligence data, falsification of intelligence reports, manipulating Commando funds to finance unauthorized projects and various charges of espionage, sabotage and treason.

"That's enough to be going on with. I don't remember a damn thing about any of those, so I can't argue. How do you fit into all this, Doc?"

I'm a very disappointed man. I've worked five years with you on this project, Bron—five years that have taken more out of me than I had to give. And what do I find? You and Ananias have been using me. Playing me for a fool.

"You're no fool, Doc, and I'm sure I never took you for one. There's a good reason behind all this—only I can't quite figure it for the moment."

Then I suggest you ask Ananias,

because Commando Central is gunning for him as well.

"I thought Ananias was currently on top."

Politically, yes. But legally the Commando Provost's building a case against both of you that even Ananias's patrons on the General Staff won't be able to quash. I've tried to help you, but there's nothing I can do unless you can give me an assist.

"I can't, Doc. I would if I could. But stay on-line, because some of the answers are out here and one of them could be the thing just coming up."

While he had been speaking, the detectors had increasingly tightened their positions in response to the computer's prognostication. Bron realized then, in the absence of any electronic returns by the instruments, that the current state of emergency had to be based entirely on real-time chaos predictions. The complex and diminutive ripples of the entropic waves provided the point on which the instruments were being aligned.

GRADUALLY the screens began to display a slight electronic fuzz at the outer limits of their detection capability and well outside attack range. With some dismay he noted that the Weapons Control group did not appear to be

following the hardening settings. To check this he started across the deck.

A hand arrested him. He turned to face Cana, who had come behind him unnoticed.

"I can guess what you're thinking, Syncretist—but it won't work. Chaos predicts the alien vessel within firm plotting range inside ten minutes. It also predicts that we're going to lose a ship. As soon as we can locate the alien accurately enough we'll open fire on it. But we won't alter the outcome—because we're reading the chaos resultant of an event which *has* to take place. As far as the patterns of chaos are concerned, the loss of one of our ships is already a matter of historical fact."

"Not to me it isn't," said Bron. "You'll soon have the alien's approach plotted in three dimensions plus the time component, with all the accuracy you need to make a kill. Are you trying to tell me that you can't put sufficiently heavy weapons down that line to destroy anything that has space capability?"

"Of course we can try," said Cana. "But you still haven't grasped the essential fact. We know our weaponry will not be effective, because we already know what the result will be. You can't alter a future event for which you can read the firm resultant."

"Why not?" asked Bron.

"Because to alter the unalterable is a contradiction in terms. By definition, you're defeated before you can begin to compose your defense. How can you hope to win a battle which future history has already determined you've lost?"

"I can see the argument, but I don't accept it. I don't see how the paradox could resolve itself—but that's chaos's problem, not mine."

Cana looked at Bron searchingly, then turned with swift decision. "Weaponsmaster, the Syncretist will direct the battle. Take his instructions as though they were mine."

Bron needed no second bidding. With long experience of Commando spacewar behind his intuition, he moved swiftly into action, briefing the Weapons Control crew to secure an immediate lock on the chaos coordinates. Then he turned back to Cana. "I presume you have chaos analysts who determine which patterns the computer is to process. I need to speak to them."

Cana signaled a communications man, who handed Bron a handset.

"Chaos complex on-line."

"Fine! Correct me if I'm wrong, but we're nearing a chaos resultant which appears to indicate the destruction of a Destroyer ship by alien fire."

"Da's correct."

"What in the chaos evidence leads you to infer that the resultant is, in fact, the destruction of a Destroyer ship?"

"Damn sure is ship. Eighteen teramegaton explosion don' happen in empty space unless ship and powerplant blow. Space-time coordinates indicate the corvette *Anne Marie* as only possible target approachin' that poin'. We already issued evacuation instructions for the crew."

"Then cancel them. I want the *Anne Marie* powered and headed out of the area before the resultant comes to term."

"You can' do that!" the voice was aghast. "You can' beat chaos!"

Bron turned back to Cana. "Confirm that order for me, will you? I've got something else to arrange."

He turned back to Weapons Control, began a rapid interrogation. The results were negative. He called the communications man to a conference and outlined his plan swiftly. In the face of his logic, nobody argued. In less than a minute they all knew what had to be arranged. Bron's radical approach begat an attitude of enthusiasm both infectious and in direct contrast with the former air of fatalistic acceptance. Only Cana remained unconvinced, but he did not interfere.

By now the alien vessel was clear

on the screens. By human standards it was a monstrosity—an unfinished bulk of black and sinister metal, blunt, rodlike and uninspired. Although it was moving at below light speed, its velocity was still greater than that of the *Skua* and her sisters. At this distance the alien appeared eyeless and utterly without the finesse required of a vessel with deep-space capability. As the battle-computer verified its position, the alien's image steadied under the crossed hairs of the screen and the final lock-on of instruments went to completion. The Weapons Control crew was now fully attentive to the task of adjusting the last few decimal places for a detailed fix, which was at the extreme end of their weapon range.

The weaponsmaster, taking post at the communications set, talking rapidly to his opposites in other Destroyer vessels, half-turned to watch the coordinates race across the computer's readout panel. The agreement came swiftly. All positions were set and maintained on lock by the battle computer. There would be no opportunity to rethink tactics if the experiment failed. Bron watched the critical registers run toward zero and nodded his acceptance.

Human fingers keyed off the safety devices and the conduct of the battle passed into electronic

hands whose reactions were limited in speed by the velocity of light alone. But nobody on the bridge was deceived about the real nature of the confrontation.

This was Bron the Syncretist against the inexorable patterns of chaos.

XV

D ID you see that ship, Doc?"

All the way, Bron. Alien as they come. No Cana trickery there. And that raises a whole load of questions. The Terran government has always denied the possibility of an alien menace and especially the possibility of alien life forms crossing the void. The last election was fought on the strength of that promise. Seems they're wrong on both counts.

"And Cana was right. The Onaris hellburner was obviously out of the same stable. It was the aliens who destroyed Onaris. And if Cana was innocent of that, how sure are we of his part in the destruction of the other planets credited to him?"

You ought to know, Bron. It was mainly you and Ananias who built up the case against the Destroyers. I'm transmitting these tapes to GenStaff. The Defense Council's going to have to do some radical rethinking in the face of this evi-

dence. I'm recalling Jaycee to the board, but I'll stay on-line until she comes.

"Engaged." Bron watched the screens critically as the detectors cautioned that the alien ship was closing to target range. He was possessed by an unexplainable sense of something wrong, but was initially unable to place it. Then he realized that the goose-mutter in his head had died to a quiet hiss. This was not a mere attenuation of the signal—the fidelity was better than ever—but the noise was subdued, held a suggestion of hushed expectancy, as if its alien originators were also spectators of the incident about to take place.

Then, from the *Skua's* mighty projectors, the long, slim tubes of the space torpedoes carrying diffract-meson warheads slid silently into the soundlessness of space on an intercept course. So accurate was the plotting that each would find its appointed place on the target within meters. Such accuracy was unnecessary, since a diffract-meson missile could destroy any known vessel with space capability if detonated within fifty kilometers of its target—but Bron had opted to take not even the slightest chance. Such was the range of the screens that the bright needles indicating the torpedoes appeared to move like snails toward

the alien, though in reality their velocity approximated one-hundredth of the speed of light. As yet the alien showed no sign of putting up a defensive screen against the attack or of taking any evasive action.

Shortly a second salvo of missiles left the *Skua's* projectors. These were heavy power mines of more conventional nuclear design. Their direction was not toward the alien but to the theoretical point in space where chaos had declared an explosion must soon take place. Nor was the *Skua* alone in this action. Seven other Destroyer craft were also contributing a complement of high-powered explosives to converge on this same point. Of all the ships in the neighborhood, the dark alien alone issued no fire and gave no sign of anticipated combat. It carved its way solidly through space as if no battle existed. The goose-mutter became inaudible.

The torpedoes reached their target first. The fantastic flare of the dozen diffract-meson reactions overloaded the scanners and dropped the screens into a blankness that lasted many seconds. When the screens came back to life again, gasps of dismay came from watchers on the bridge. The alien vessel was both undestroyed and apparently undisturbed. It continued to plough a steady course

into the middle of the Destroyer fleet, having survived a particulate reaction calculated to annihilate completely any object made of any material found in the known universe.

A few moments later the power mines converged in space to form the eighteen tera-megaton explosion at the empty point where chaos analysis had predicted the *Anne Marie* should have been but for Bron's intervention. The corvette itself had been hastily diverted and now lay witnessing the harmless diversion of its own fate. The explosion formed the entropic resultant required to justify the existence of the particular chaos wavefront and effectively substituted for the ship Bron had saved.

Cana's eyes were alive with speculation.

"Thank you, Syncretist! You begin to reveal a little of your promise. No other man in history has ever managed to manipulate a chaos resultant successfully. You didn't learn that trick in any mad seminary on Onaris—and I doubt it's standard Commando practice, either. You're not only a born catalyst but also a very remarkable man."

BRON'S reply was halted by a sudden cry from the operator at the screens. He turned. The

image of the alien ship was being held in full focus and magnified to fill the limits of the frame. Although the diffract-meson impacts had done no obvious damage, they had apparently thrown the vessel out of its bald trajectory. Now the monstrous creation was rolling and tumbling, not so much in the manner of a ship thrown out of control as like a stick thrown idly into a wind.

Bron and the Destroyers watched in fascination as the uncouth and mammoth cylinder rolled slowly end over end. They were treated to a good view of its imprecision as a ship, but gained no idea at all of its purpose or its mode of function. Then a shocking fact revealed itself. As the vessel turned it became apparent that its rear end was either missing or else had never existed. There were no drive tubes, no reaction mechanisms, no continuation even of an end wall. The whole vast structure was no more than an empty shell, a cylinder closed at one end and open to space at the other. It had no contents and no internal partitions. What form of mystery had accelerated it to such a velocity while holding it true along its major axis was a question Bron felt totally incapable of answering.

The drama deepened as he watched incredulously. The tumbling enigma passed centrally

through the point where the substitute explosion had occurred and continued blindly onward. The screens adjusted suddenly past it, as if seeking foreknowledge of its destination. The graticule settled on the distant image of another corvette, the *Jubal*. Barely had the gain been adjusted to produce a reasonable image when the dark, alien cylinder hit the *Jubal* like a throwing-stick striking a bird in flight.

The conclusion was even less anticipated. By some unholy reaction both the *Jubal* and the alien artifact broke up—not apparently through force, but through a kind of mutual disintegration. There was no explosion, no obvious release of energy, merely a crazy annihilation of the mass of both bodies as they came into physical contact. Incredibly, each seemed to contain a state of matter that was the antithesis of the other. The effect was a kind of cancellation of the existence of both, with no manifestation of the latent energy that should have been the consequence of the complete destruction of so much mass. Shortly the only evidence of the event was a small quantity of space flotsam and an enigmatic question mark in the minds of the men who had observed it.

ALMOST immediately the goose-mutter rose to a crescendo

inside Bron's head. Automatically he thought of it as the cheering of a vast crowd, yet the unintelligible semantic undertones were more indicative of fear than jubilation. However, the aliens were certainly witnesses to the event, because the timing of their resurgence was too precise to be coincidental. His mind tried to contain their alienness, but balked at the task. These creatures were things with means and talents beyond the ken of anything in human experience. He had no inbuilt references on which to hang his hazy concepts of them. Only two things they seemed to share with human kind—hostility and fear.

Cana said, "We seem to have worthy enemies, Syncretist. They're taking you on at your own game."

"How do you mean?" asked Bron.

"You cheated chaos by substituting your own reason for the existence of a wave in the pattern. They countered by destroying the *Jubal* by means that would not produce an entropic wave. By chaos-analysis your method is indistinguishable from a real event, theirs, from a classic non-event. Which means we stand a very good chance of winning."

"How do you compute that?"

Cana smiled tiredly. "My dear Syncretist, we have evidence, such

as the Onaris hellburner, that the aliens have been experimenting with chaos for hundreds of millions of years. I was watching you just now and your reactions were instinctive. You evolved an answer comparable with theirs in something under seven minutes. Now I see why they're so afraid of you."

A furious burst of static in his head warned Bron of something occurring on the transfer link. Then a muffled but recognizable voice broke in.

Ananias on-line. Do you read me, honey-bitch?

Veeder reading you, Ananias. What the hell's going on?

Listen in, Doc, and keep a line open to GenStaff. I've already sent in my report. This next session's going to be critical. Bron, are you reading me?

"Like a book, Ananias. What's the readout?"

We've just cleared subspace and made rendezvous with the Com-mando fleet on the Rim. I've a task force of sixty-eight ships here, all battle-ready and eager for a killing. I'm broadcasting on FTL radio as well as on the transfer link because I want Cana to hear what I have to say.

"I hope you're not thinking of threatening him. He's easily got twice the firepower you can muster."

Threaten him? You must be out of your tiny addled mind. We haven't come to threaten—we've come to join him. Chaos predicts the main alien spacefleet only a few days out in the void. From the looks it's a bloody armada rather than a fleet—and it's going to do a hell of a lot of damage.

Bron turned to Cana. "General Ananias is trying to contact you on FTL transmissions. He reckons the alien main fleet is only a few days out and he wants to bring the Commando fleet to help."

"Tell him I'll talk to him," said Cana. "I'd been wondering if he ever would keep the pact we made on the *Tantalus* after we rescued him from the void."

XVI

IN THE *Skua's* communications room Bron supervised the adjustment of the FTL communications web until two-way contact was established with Ananias. Cana waited impatiently until he could speak the first word.

"General Ananias—my intelligence network gives me no favorable impression of your attitude toward the so-called Destroyer federation of planets."

"I warned you at our last meeting, Cana, that such a situation might be necessary."

"Indeed yes. But for the benefit of the Commando authorities who may have access to this conversation, I should prefer to hear the record set out plainly."

"As you wish. You know as well as I that the alien menace is a real and active threat not only to the Rim Dependencies, but to your federation—and ultimately to Terra itself. We've both known this for many years. Unfortunately, such has been the insecure structure of Terran governments over that period that any account of alien threats to our galaxy has been rejected as irresponsible alarmism. The Terran standpoint is untenable. I have been in the void in command of the *Tantalus* and have personally witnessed the sort of physical threat posed by the aliens. You yourself must know only too well what type of danger they are to our existence. I think you'll agree the evidence shows they appear to have no intention of allowing humans any sort of foothold in space."

"I agree with your summary this far, General. But you dodge the issue. Why have you so persistently vilified the Destroyer nations?"

"I'm not dodging the issue. I'm attempting to explain. Since I was unable to convince the Terran government about the alien threat I had to adopt a more extreme tac-

tic. It was obviously necessary for Terra's defense that a strong spacefleet be developed and maintained. In connivance with Commander Bron of Stellar Commando Intelligence, we deliberately attributed facets of the alien's long-range attacks to the Destroyers. By this ruse we were able to encourage Terra to invest in a superior defensive spacefleet on the misguided assumption that the Destroyers were the real enemy. Neither Bron nor myself ever believed this, but we consistently misreported the evidence to make it appear to be the truth. For some reason you were a credible danger, while the aliens were not. Since Bron is now in your hands I must make it clear that he was the major architect of our policy of deception. He is also one of the most powerful chaos catalysts our analysts have ever detected. For this reason we decided to manipulate him into the situation with the greatest concentration of firepower. That's why you now find him in your camp rather than ours."

"Is this true, Syncretist?" asked Cana.

"I wouldn't know," said Bron. "But it does supply a lot of missing pieces. Did you say I planned this, Ananias?"

"Every crooked move of it, Bron.

It was a scheme that suited your talent for playing the system against itself. You tricked the Commandos into sending you right into the hands of the Destroyers—which was where you most wanted to be. Only a few of us knew that you went to join the Destroyers rather than fight them. The trouble was, you nearly undid all of us when you lost your memory halfway through the act."

"Accepting that, General," said Cana, "what proposition had you in mind?"

"With the evidence of this transfer-link conversation added to my own reports, Terra can no longer deny that the alien threat exists. Whether she likes it or not, Terra is now committed to help you against the common enemy. But however close the cooperation, I can't see Terra permitting her fleets to come under Destroyer control."

"Do they need to?" asked Cana.

"Come!" reproached Ananias. "You know the inverse square law as applied to spacewar battle tactics. Two small independent fleets have only a twenty-five percent chance of survival compared with one larger coordinated fleet."

"That's statistically correct, but it still raises an impasse. Since we were lately enemies I can't happily

subscribe to the notion of the Destroyer fleet becoming subject to Terran control.”

“Then here’s my proposition. If I can swing Terran opinion, would you be prepared for both fleets to come under Bron? He’s an experienced battle commander. He’s certainly the prime chaos catalyst at this time—and his location with your fleet seems to be an effective compromise between Terran and Destroyer viewpoints.”

CANA looked at Bron speculatively. “I’ve lost Martin Daiquist, my lieutenant, so I don’t have a candidate of my own to offer. Having seen Bron in action just now, I’m prepared to believe that he’s the one man who can handle the job. I can accept your proposition only if both fleets are subject entirely to his control—and without his being subject to pressure from Terran sources.”

Jaycee on-line, Bron. Jaycee’s voice came into Bron’s head alone and was not repeated over the speakers. We’ve rerouted the transfer link so as not to interfere with Ananias’s broadcast. GenStaff’s been monitoring your conversation on-line, and they’re in agreement with Ananias’s scheme, if you want to follow through. The final decision’s up to you.

“That was quick, Jaycee. What shook them up?” Bron spoke subvocally.

Partly the tapes Doc took from your earlier report and partly the fact that fourteen planets of the Rim Dependencies have stopped transmitting. Three of them got out messages saying they were being attacked by something from the void. They were certain it was not the Destroyers. There was a major defense panic until somebody realized that you and Ananias already had the situation solved. Are you going to take the job?”

“It’s not the decision, it’s the capability that worries me. Yes, I’ll take it—but get hold of Ander and put him to checking through the tapes on the encounter with that alien ship-thing. There may be chaos implications there that we’ve missed. Certainly unless our weaponry is more effective than it was then, we’re lost before we start.”

Engaged, Bron. I’ll be reportin’ as soon as we get some answers.

Bron turned back to Cana, who had been watching the progress of the unheard conversation as it was mirrored on Bron’s face.

“I have Terran GenStaff’s agreement to your terms. I’ll take the job on the assurance that I won’t be subjected to pressures from you either.”

"You have my word on it," said Cana.

"I warn you," said Bron, "it'll be a rough ride. A little while ago you lost a perfectly good corvette to a sort of alien throw-away container. If we can't get the better of a garbage can by using diffract-meson warheads, then what the hell do you think is going to happen when we meet their battle fleet?"

"I don't know," said Cana heavily. "I've been living with that specter for years. Because of it I forged the independent planets into the Destroyer Federation, knowing all the time that we never really stood a chance if the aliens crossed the void in force. But I'm growing older and it's going to be a war for swift brains and nimble fingers. I'd groomed Martin for the job—but he couldn't survive you. Somehow I doubt the aliens will have any better luck. There's something about you, Syncretist, that is unassailable."

"ANANIAS," said Bron. "Fourteen planets of the Rim Dependencies have stopped transmitting. Presumably some of the aliens got there first. Can you send a scout formation and get some positive information? Also relay to me data on what classes of ships you have available and details of their armaments. Too,

you must have some kind of chaos computing complex. I want a full hookup with Cana's chaos men. The aliens have a few hundred million years start on handling chaos and I want us to catch up fast."

Engaged, Bron. You know, this is quite like old times—

"Then get off-line and get busy. Put a few scoutships out in the void and try to get us some facts and figures about the strength and disposition of the alien fleet. And stay off the transfer link. Use the FTL radio unless you have an extreme emergency."

There was the sudden cessation of the hiss of a carrier wave as Ananias cut out his circuits. Now that the bio-electronic relay had less to contend with, he was again conscious of the sound of drowning geese. Perhaps twenty individual voices predominated over the general babble and these prime spokesmen rippled across the audible spectrum in a hideously broken yodel, as though their voices were modulated by large bubbles rising through a silo of molasses. Their mood sounded nervous, quick and urgent, as if indicating that time was a critical factor of their actions.

The babble was hypnotic and he was powerless to shut it out. The rise and fall of the anxious spokes-

men suggested the swell of a stygian river, while the quieter, more powerful background mutter was that of a pressing tide. Perhaps an ultrasonic ceiling to the echo in the voices gave the impression of a cavern roof, caught under hundreds of kilometers of dark pressure, yet extending onward like a dreadful pipe leading into an unknown darkness.

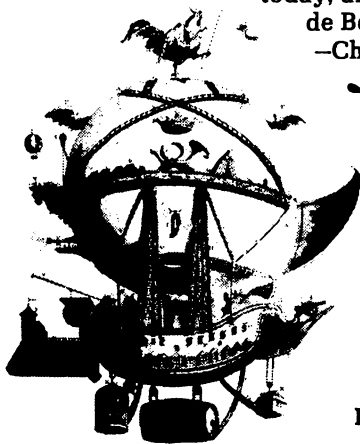
He had no doubt now that these

were the voices of the aliens in the void. By some obscure trick of physics, their communications system infringed on his own transfer link. If their voices could fetch him such strange and alien visions, he wondered equally what the byplay between Jaycee and himself could mean to them. He was not even sure at times what it meant to him—let alone her.

TO BE CONTINUED

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ROBERT BLOCH

*Nature may cast
you in one role,
success in another!*

THE OLD SWITCHEROO

THE moment the transporter landed on his roof, Joe Slobkin came running to meet me.

I could tell at a glance that success hadn't gone to his head. Apparently it had moved in the other direction, for he was wearing a pair of ermine shorts.

"Same old Joe," I said.

"Why not?" He took off his diamond-studded sunglasses (ground specially for him by the same team that had worked on the Moonbase

Observatory lens) and grinned at me. "You don't have to worry about me, old buddy. Even if I am the most intelligent-type agent in Hollywood, which modesty forbids I should mention."

Leading me along the flat roof, he paused before the transporter as the uniformed pilot saluted him.

"Park it in the hangar with the others," he ordered.

The pilot clicked his heels. "Will that be all, sir?"

"Yeah. Take the rest of the day off. But before you go, remember to feed the elephant."

"You have a pet elephant?" I murmured.

"Who said anything about pets? Some of my musician clients are all the time coming over and banging on my grand piano. I got tired of replacing the busted keys, so I figured it would be cheaper raising my own ivory. In this business you gotta watch all the angles."

I had no answer to that, so I turned and stared down at the palatial expanse of San Simoleon, the Slobkin estate.

"Quite a view, huh?" he commented. "On a clear day you can see the smog."

I shook my head. "How did you ever manage to find a place surrounded entirely by mountains?"

"Just wanted privacy, dig? Matter of fact, it wasn't surrounded. When I came here it had mountains on only three sides. I built the fourth one myself."

"And that kidney-shaped swimming pool—"

"You like it? Had a doctor design it for me. Modeled after one of my own kidneys. On the other side I got a liver-shaped swimming pool. Which I don't use, on account of hepatitis."

Slobkin led me to the elevator and we descended to the Grand

Ballroom. A golden fountain cascaded merrily at one end, and Slobkin produced glasses that he held beneath the spray.

"How's for some champagne?"

I took the glass, staring in admiration at his tattooed arm.

"Neat, huh?" He flexed his biceps. "It's an original Picasso. You know, Sidney Picasso, the old-time artist's grandson. Had him do it the last time I was in Paris. Some day I'll get something put on my chest. Maybe one of them there Remnants, or Rembrands, whatever."

"Rembrandt is dead," I said.

"Hell, too bad. I should of caught him on the first trip." Slobkin led me to a sofa before the fireplace, at which silent, unobtrusive servants were barbecuing a yak on a spit. We settled back in comfort.

"Let's rap about you," he said. "Been over three years since we huddled. What's the scam?"

"Nothing to tell. I'm still a freelance writer."

Slobkin frowned. "Same bag, huh? Speaking of which, I bet you still got the same wife, too. You never did have no ambition. Look what I done in the past couple years."

"I'm looking," I told him. "And I still can't believe it. Just think, when I met you, all you had was desk space in that little office over on Smogset Strip."

His frown deepened. "That pay-toilet! No wonder I never got nowhere being an agent—crowded into the same room with ten other guys. Why, in those days I didn't even have a spot to pitch in."

I nodded. "You couldn't get a line into the studios. I remember how excited you were the first time you landed a part for a client. Who was that, anyway?"

"It was a chimpanzee," Slobkin said. "I had a deal lined up with Paranoid Pictures. They were to use him as somebody's stand-in for *Beyond The Backside Of The Planet Of The Apes*. Only he bombed. Once the chimp got a whiff of makeup he decided to quit show biz and go into politics." Slobkin grimaced with angry distaste. "Believe me, I didn't vote for him. But he got in anyway. More champagne? Or a little caviar, maybe? I'll have one of the boys run down to the pond and squeeze out a sturgeon."

"Never mind." I gestured him back into his seat. "What I want to know is what happened to you. How did the change come about?"

"**N**O CHANGE," Joe Slobkin told me solemnly. "Just the old switcheroo, that's all. The old switcheroo."

"You're going to tell me about it, aren't you?"

"Sure. That's why I had you come out here. Figured you could use a story. And this one's a grabber. This one I could break with any of the services. But I wanted it should go to you, baby." Slobkin chewed sentimentally on the end of his cigar.

I leaned forward. "Would it by any chance happen to concern your two biggest clients? Has it something to do with Ricky Ticky and Michele Belch?"

Slobkin nodded. "I'll tell it like it is."

And he did, just as I'm putting it down here. Only the grammar has been changed, to protect the innocent.

Three years ago (Joe Slobkin told me) there was no such person as Ricky Ticky. There was no such person as Michele Belch. There was just poor old Joe Slobkin, the ten-percenter, sitting in his little desk-space and trying to figure out how he could live on ten percent of nothing. And there was a kid named Oscar Fink and a chick named Irma Schmutz.

"Very straight," Slobkin said. "And loaded with talent. This Irma Schmutz could do anything—sing, dance or play all kinds of instruments, including musical. Oscar Fink was great, too. Particularly on imitations. That stud could do a take-off on anybody. Really a nat-

ural, dig? But neither of 'em had a dime and neither of 'em had a chance. I guess that's why they finally ended up with me.

"Well, I did my best, but it was like nowhere. Two of 'em got acquainted in my office and they used to come in together, sort of like a team. One day they leaned on me—wanted to know what was wrong. So I laid it on them.

"I told 'em the whole hangup was they were weak in the looks department. This Irma Schmutz was just what you might call an average bird. Brown hair, thin face, a little on the tall side. Also, her chest was flat enough to play Scrabble on, if that's your kick.

"Oscar Fink was in even worse shape, what there was of it. He was short, had kind of a high voice and ran to fat.

"So what's a guy gonna do? You know how important the old image is in this industry. And I put it to them just that way, let it all hang out.

"Nobody was happy when I got finished. Irma said, 'But Oscar is a good mimic. He doesn't have to be a groovy-looking stud for that, does he?' And Oscar said, 'Irma can play and sing and dance even with her clothes on—what more do you want?'

"I told 'em it wasn't a question of what I wanted. It's what the

public wants. Brown-haired, flat-chested babes don't get to be stars—they just get married.

"And that's where Oscar Fink came up with the beginning of the switcheroo.

"He told me something I should of figgered for myself all along. 'Fake it,' he said. 'All you got to do is fake it. What kind of chicks made it in the oldtime movies? Right from the beginning it's been big-busted blondes—Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe and all those other broads. How many of them used their real names? How many of them were real blondes? How many of them had natural big busts?'

"Well, I had to admit he was right, at least about the names and the blonde part of it. The busts I never had a chance to investigate, not firsthand, that is.

"Oscar Fink poured it on. 'So you change her name,' he said. 'And dye her hair. And you do a little shopping for falsies at Farmer's Market or wherever. Teach her to wiggle when she walks and pitch her voice lower. No problem.'

"This got Irma all excited. Don't forget Oscar, either,' she said. 'Maybe he looks more like a crud than a stud, but he has talent. What about all the hard-rock and soul singers with the way-out names? They weren't handsome either, but

you couldn't see their faces under the hair. They mostly didn't sing, just howled. Like this.' And she ups with a demonstration which is like to tear my ears off.

“SO I say, 'Okay, why not? We got nothing to lose. First off, we change the names. From now on there ain't no Irma Schmutz and Oscar Fink any more. From now on you're gonna be—let's see—Michele Belch and Ricky Ticky.'”

“Just like that the names come to me. After which I slammed out a couple of fake biographies, got in touch with some flacks who owed me a few favors, went out and bought them a mod wardrobe on credit, rounded up an electronic guitar from a hockshop, and we were rolling.”

Joe Slobkin paused to catch his breath, and his third glass of champagne.

“You don't have to tell me any more,” I said. “Everybody knows what happened after that. Michele Belch got a walk-on bit in a family-type home-nudie and became a sensation the moment she stopped walking and started to lie down. Ricky Ticky signed with an obscure recording company—Obscure Records, wasn't it?—got a few numbers on cassettes—and the phones began to ring all over the

country. It's been a pushover all the way.”

Joe Slobkin shook his head. “That's what you think. Only it wasn't quite so easy.”

“But all this happened, didn't it?”

“Sure it happened. Only not at first.”

“What did happen first, then?”

“They bombed.”

I frowned. “You mean the scheme didn't work?”

“That's right, baby. It didn't work. Changing names wasn't enough. Planting stories wasn't enough. I ought to have figured it from the start. Maybe a smart flesh-peddler can take a skinny little chick and build her up into a real C-cup personality. Maybe he can turn an insignificant little insect into another Beatle. But he's got to have something going for him if he wants to hit the top ten on the Porno Graph. The chick has to be sexy; the guy has to put a gut-feeling into his vocal chords. Trouble is, all these two had was ability. And so they bombed.”

I stared at him. “How can you say that? They *did* make it. The stories are true, you built them up, made big stars out of them, made millions.”

Joe Slobkin smiled patiently. “Later. After I figured out the angle.”

"What angle? Is that the story you're giving me an exclusive on?"

The little agent turned pale. "Not in a million years!" he gasped. "This is all off the record, get me? The yarn I want you to break is—" "Joe, baby—!"

My head swiveled at the interruption, then nearly fell off as Michele Belch wriggled into the room. She was every bit as blonde, as bosomy and as beautiful as in my wildest dreams. She was puffing on an Acapulco roach.

"Hiya sweetheart!"

It was Ricky Ticky, in the flashy flesh; tangled hair mopping his thin forehead and his velvet blue-jeans glued to his *gluteus maximus* with a crotch-clutching closeness.

"Everything set?" Joe Slobkin inquired.

"Copasetic." Ricky nodded at Michele. "We trans off for New Vegas in five minutes, right from your pad here. Be married in an hour. Got my guitar all packed for the honeymoon."

"Beautiful!" Joe Slobkin beamed and advanced on Michele. "How's the bride? Got enough luggage and everything?"

"Just my hope chest," she replied, with a shy downward glance at the article in question.

I gulped. "This is true? These two are going to be hitched?"

Slobkin nodded at me. "Eloping

right now. That's why I got you over here. In a couple of hours the wire-tapes will have the whole enchilada—but it's yours, right now, in advance. Minute they leave, you get on the com and make a deal with the media for your exclusive. Tomorrow you'll be made, baby—the guy who beat old Jill Haber and Bill Katz to the biggest news item of the century."

He turned and faced the loving couple. "This guy's my buddy," he murmured. "I want you two to cooperate—answer any questions he lays on you."

"I've got no questions," I said. "I think I can handle it without a routine interview, and something tells me you're both anxious to get on your way."

"Yeah." Slobkin nodded, frowning at Ricky Ticky. "Something tells me the same thing, and get your hands off her until the honeymoon. Or at least until you're on the trans."

Ricky Ticky grinned at me. "Mighty nice of you to understand."

I took a deep breath. "Just one favor, though. Uh—could I kiss the bride?"

Michele Belch gave me a surprised look. Then she took the ciggy out of her mouth, crushed it and stood indecisively for a moment, holding it in her hand. A quick

glance was exchanged between her and Ricky. Then, with a coy gesture, she waved her butt at me.

I ADVANCED to claim my reward. Somehow I hadn't reckoned on the bearskin in front of the fireplace. My heel caught in the bear's open jaws and I slipped. My hands, seeking to encircle Michele's shoulders, grabbed at her hair instead.

It came off.

"Holy Toledo!" cried Joe Slobkin "Get the hell out of here!

Ricky Ticky began to sob. "Now look what's happened! He'll spill it—I know he'll spill it!"

"No he won't!" Slobkin shouted. "He's with it. Besides, I was gonna tell him anyway, after you left. Just cut out now, before anybody else sees you. Split!"

He herded them off in the direction of the elevator, and I sank back on the sofa as the babble of their voices died away in the distance.

A moment later Joe Slobkin returned. Silently he handed me a glass of champagne and silently I drank it.

"So that's how it is," I said.

"Yeah." He sighed deeply, then shallowly. "That's how it is. I told you they bombed. And then I lucked out.

"I got to thinking about the way

they'd given me a pitch that day in the office. Here was a kid who could imitate anybody—so why not an imitation of a chick? What was wrong with giving *him* the falsies, and maybe a good wig?

"And here was a chick who had talent for any instrument and a voice that could lift the roof off an outhouse at three hundred feet. Why not let *her* grow the mop and wear the jeans? So I put it to them, and they bought it, and the rest is like history."

"Unisex, eh?"

"Right," Slobkin assured me. "Like I told you, it's nothing but the old switcheroo."

Many months have passed since the truth was revealed to me there in the Grand Ballroom of Slobkin's estate. Since that time the marriage of Ricky Ticky and Michele Belch has reached the point where a blessed event is in the offing. In view of this fact, their secret can remain a secret no longer, and I am thus privileged to reveal the facts.

What I'm really hoping for now is that my old friend Joe Slobkin will see fit to give me another exclusive story. I'd like a scoop on the impending birth.

But up to this time, Joe Slobkin hasn't quite made up his mind whether they're going to have a boy or a girl. ●

recognized by any of our highly regarded science fiction authors? To my mind only one has come anywhere close: John Brunner with *The Jagged Orbit and Stand on Zanzibar*.

After all, it is still our duty to be concerned with reality as well as possibility.

David Riddle
Paxtang, Pa.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

Many thanks for the most hopeful and encouraging story in years. I refer, of course, to *Dazed by Theodore Sturgeon* (*Galaxy*, Sept. '71).

I wish it were true—and in that respect I am encouraged by his statement that "belief of disbelief has no effect on objective truth."

Judith Guccione
Peru, Ill.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

As a newcomer to the readership of *If* I am lacking of certain information. Mainly, how to purchase a copy of *Galaxy* to find out whether or not I wish to subscribe to it. I have not been able to find it on any of my local newsstands or

anywhere else and I am interested in having a look at it.

Now, as regards *If*, specifically *Gambler's Choice in the March/April '71* issue, I have a slight correction. In the problem stated, as any student of probability will tell you, all the fractions involved are what is called mutually exclusive. That is, simply put, only one of the circling torpedoes must be hit twice. Multiplying the fractions $1/362$, $2/362$. . . $25/362$ will give the chances of hitting one torpedo for a second time on every shot, provided, of course, that the number of torpedoes hit once expands miraculously after each successful shot.

The proper equation for a situation where the odds change between attempts is the first odds ($1/362$) added to the second odds ($2/362$) minus the product of the two (this allows for overlap) for two attempts. Since Mr. Shaw has given Mr. Targett 25 shots, the answer to: $1/362 + 2/362 - (1/362 \times 2/362)$ must be added to the next fraction: $3/362$ and the product of those two subtracted and on and on till $25/362$ is reached and operated upon.

In other words, for any two mutually exclusive probabilities ($A \&$

B), the total probability is equal to $A+B-AB$. For three fractions this rapidly expands to: $(A+B-AB)+C-(A+B-AB) \times C$. For twenty-five fractions (not including zero, because $A+0-A \times 0=A$) the problem is enormous.

The reason for my delay in writing this is because I have finally been given access to a computer. With a simple loop the computer can solve the problem. The chances are 60.134% in Mr. Targett's favor, or three out of five. The odds are three to two, not two to one, as stated in the story. Still, not bad.

If Targett's first shot had had any chance of shooting down a torpedo the chances would have been two to one.

You have permission to print my full address.

Steven M. Kemp
1833 Addison Street
Philadelphia, Pa. 19146

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

Some years ago Jack Vance began a series of novels about the *Demon Princes* and how one man, Kirth Gersen, set out to kill them one by one. To my knowledge Mr. Vance has only written the following books in the series: *The Star King*, *The Killing Machine* and *The Palace of Love*. There were five *Demon Princes* and the above

novels deal with the fates of three of them. Could you possibly tell me if Mr. Vance has abandoned the series or, if he hasn't, where interested readers might obtain copies of the other two (I presume) books?

Let me just say that if Mr. Vance has abandoned the series I consider it a great loss, because each novel was meticulously written and extremely interesting. The social and cultural background for the stories is one of the most imaginative and well conceived galactic communities I have ever come across.

If you could come through with this information for me I would really appreciate it.

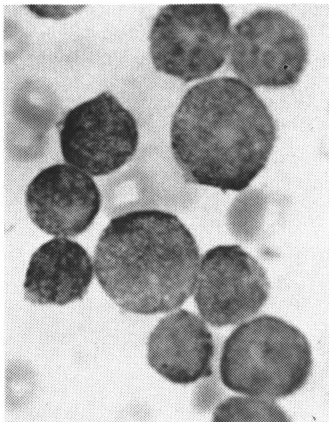
Roger Ryan
Ontario, Canada

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The enemy.

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"Temporary remission", yes. New forms of leukemia treatment were helping some children stay alive a little longer. But that seemed to be all that medical science could give them. Another few months. Another birthday or two.

Now we're seeing something that's almost too good to believe. A whole crop of kids who are alive and well 5 years or more after getting a new kind of drug therapy. And after 5 years, cancer researchers begin to hesitatingly, hopefully, talk of a permanent "cure."

Leukemia is cancer of the blood. Before you have a cure, you have to destroy every last cancer cell in the bloodstream. The new treatment is a combination of different anti-

leukemia drugs, so that, hopefully, any cells missed by one drug might be killed by another.

It seems to work. We're still holding our breath, but it really seems to work. The 5-year survivors that gladden our hearts today are the result of combination treatments begun in 1964. And work has been going on feverishly ever since. Each year, the children who get leukemia have a far better chance of cure than those of the year before.

The American Cancer Society plays a vital part in this exciting work. So, when our volunteer comes to your door this month, be generous. Especially if you have children. Or grandchildren.

American Cancer Society
We want to wipe out cancer in your lifetime.

What do you think would happen if:

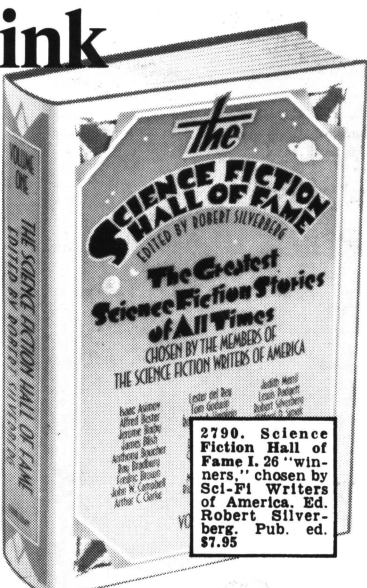
A group of workers controlling all the nation's transportation decided to strike?

A temperamental child could destroy anything displeasing him?

A key defense scientist became convinced man was no more than a high-class bacterium cultured by a superior life form?

Machines created to think like people developed people emotions?

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