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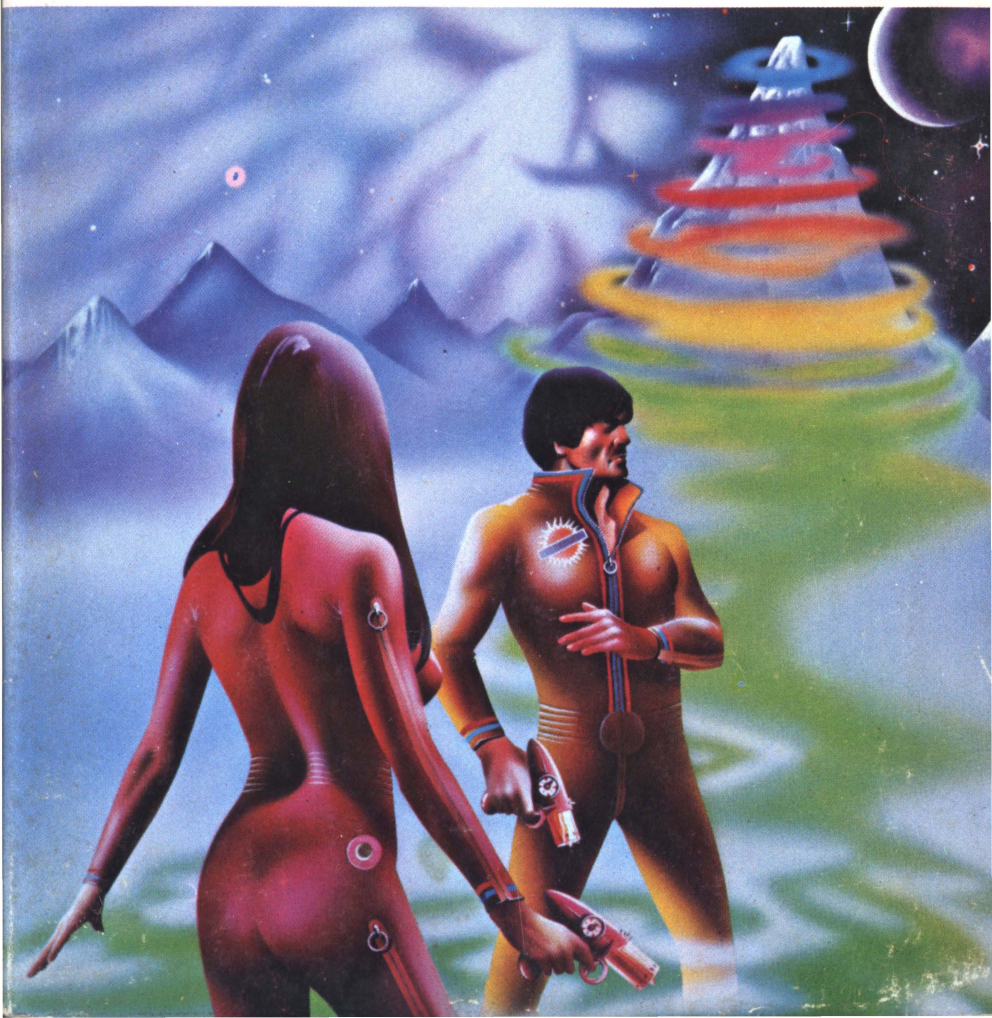

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WORLDS OF IF SCIENCE FICTION

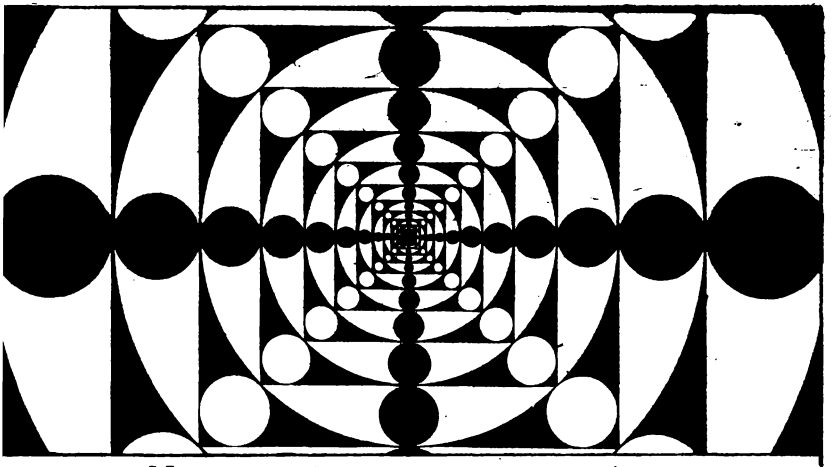
September-October 1972
Vol. 21, No. 7
Issue 162

ALL NEW STORIES

Cover by BRIAN BOYLE, from *Gods on Olympus*

WORLDS OF IF is published bimonthly by UPD Publishing Corporation, a subsidiary of Universal Publishing & Distributing Corporation. Arnold E. Abramson, President. Main Offices: 235 East 45 Street, New York, N.Y. 10017. Single copy: 75¢. 12-issue subscription: $9.00 in U.S., $10.00 elsewhere.

WORLDS OF IF is published in the United Kingdom by Universal-Tandem Publishing Company, Ltd., 14 Gloucester Road, London SW7 4RD. Arnold E. Abramson, Chairman of the Board. Ralph Stokes, Managing Director. Single copy: 25p. 12-issue subscription in the United Kingdom: £3.60.



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IF7

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I just finished reading Patterns of Chaos *(Colin Kapp) last night and it thrilled me so much that I felt I must write and congratulate. The last novel you published that took me equally was* I Will Fear No Evil *(Robert A. Heinlein). I also enjoyed* Dark Inferno *and* The Gods Themselves.

I'd like to comment on some recent trends in science fiction. Now that man has been to the moon I no longer find near-space science fiction too speculative. Voyages beyond the solar system, even beyond the galaxy, based on what we know, remain exciting. Also the concept of social science fiction is growing in importance as it begins to answer many questions that need answering.

I had my doubts when your magazines changed ownership and editors in '69, but now I confess you've made the Galaxy/If *combo a treat to receive each month.*

Roy J. Schenck
Canisteo, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

There is a science-fiction story I'm trying to relocate. I read it a number of years ago in one of the better magazines—can't remember which one or the title of the story or even the author. But I'll never forget the plot.

Let me tell it briefly against the possibility that you or one of your readers might remember. A starship leaves Earth—purpose of the voyage is exploration.

The ship is a mile long, carries hundreds of experts.

Several generations pass and the ship is not heard from. Earth has developed more efficient space drives —her ships range the galaxy and one comes on the lost ship.

The lost explorer had reached far out, lost its power source. It had, however, a "space anchor." For generations the people on board have been locking the anchor in space at one end of a track running the length of the ship. Working in massive shifts, the people on board "walk" the ship forward past its mooring, release and reset the anchor forward, begin again—literally walking the ship home a few miles a day. A religion has grown out of this activity.

Would-be rescuers discover that it would destroy these people to be told their faith and efforts were unnecessary and they're left to finish the journey on their own.

The plot is distinctive and I hope the story hasn't just faded into the past. I would like to find a copy.

(Mrs.) Carl Vernon Weiss
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The story's one I regret to have missed. Can anybody out there lend a hand?

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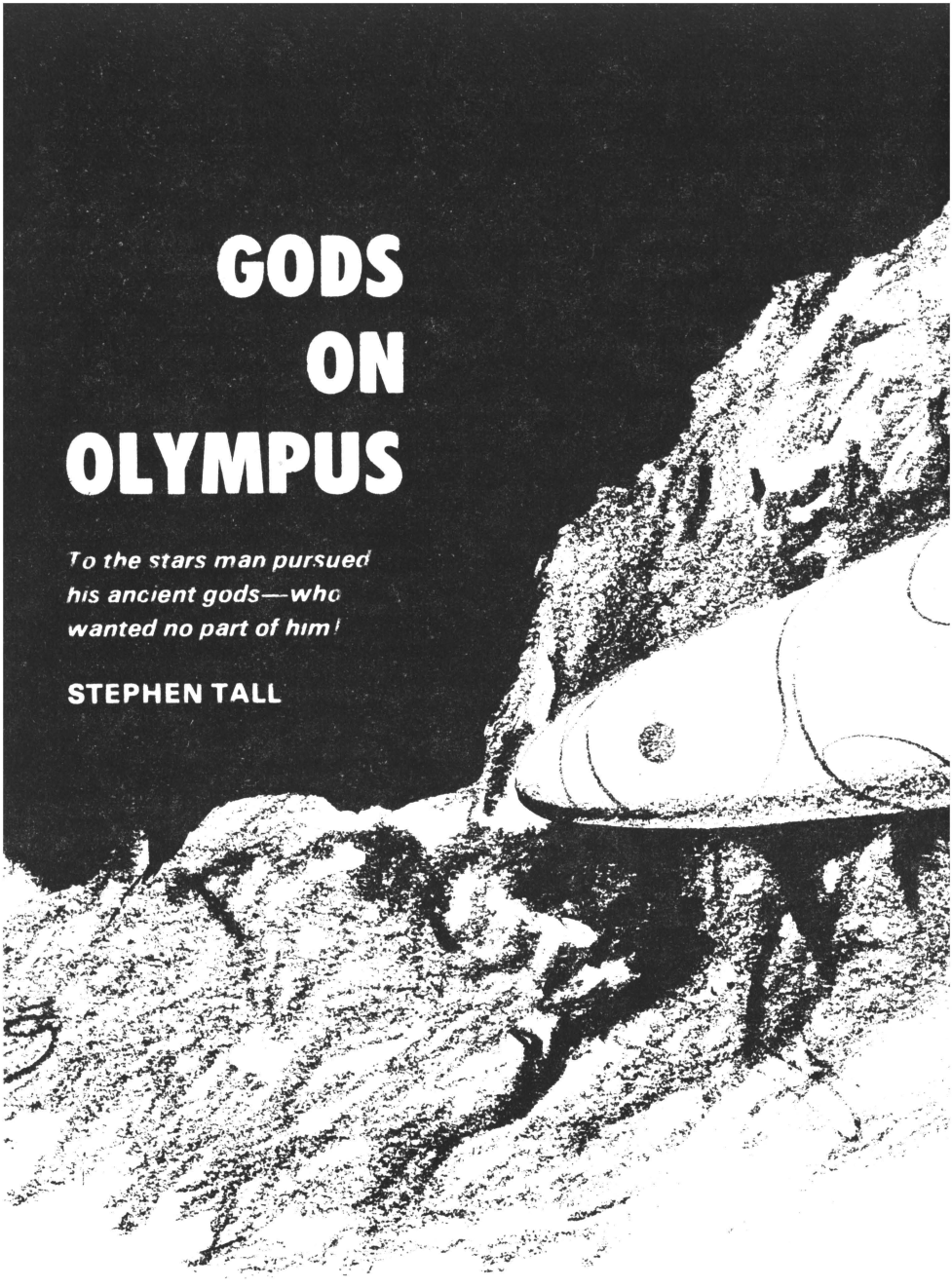
GODS ON OLYMPUS

To the stars man pursued his ancient gods—who wanted no part of him!

STEPHEN TALL



I

FROM first orbit it had made itself conspicuous, looming high above the loftiest of the long chain of rugged peaks that made a backbone for the planet. And when Cap'n Jules Griffin brought in the *Stardust*, easing down through layers of clouds toward magnificent sweeps of sunlit terrain below, that summit was a natural focus for our curiosity.

"Take a turn around the big fellow while we're in the neighborhood," I suggested. "Let Pegleg have a ball. I'm no expert at measuring, but that ought to make Everest look like a medium-sized molehill."

"Better than forty thousand feet," Pegleg Williams announced. He had, I knew, been eyeing the big peak from the time we began visual reconnaissance. He adjusted his triangulation glasses. "This

one breaks my record by thousands. Mount Rasmussen on Primrose Four was thirty-four seven, as you recall. Named it for Johnny because he's top man and I doubted that I'd ever see a higher one. Sorry, Johnny."

Dr. Johannes Rasmussen didn't seem particularly upset. But then, he never did. He leaned back in the Director's chair, long, thin and immaculate as always. He looked as though he had shaved within the hour. His mustaches were waxed to points. But his eyes twinkled behind his reserved, still face.

"Your intentions were good, Dr. Williams," he said. "More I couldn't ask. I'm quite content with Mount Rasmussen on Primrose Four. I'll certainly not take its picture down from my office wall because we've discovered a higher peak. I am many things, but, I hope, not fickle."

Usually formal and grave, occasionally Johnny would fool you. No man crossed him when he said things for sure and many of the crew never found him other than cerebral and remote. But in the control room of the explorer ship *Stardust* we were men who knew each other well. We were all a part of what would be the legend of the *Stardust*—had been from the beginning.

Moe Cheng sat quietly in the navigator's seat. For the moment his responsibilities were over. He had guided us across trackless space, stage after Ultraspan stage, until the little yellow dot that the space charts called Olympus had become a brilliant golden sun. Probably only Moe Cheng could have done it. Certainly no one has ever known as much about the galaxy as this big-nosed, slant-eyed little man.

The big peaks of Olympus's second planet turned beneath us as Cap'n Jules swept the ship in a vast circle around the mighty jumble of crags and pinnacles that made up the most impressive uplift any of us had ever seen. Great glaciers flowed down its shoulders. Below them green and gray sweeps of tundra merged with dark forests crowding up from the valleys and foothills. It was an Earthlike scene, but in giant scale. I thought of the Himalayas, the Andes, the Icefield Ranges of the St. Elias. It was all of them and more. Much, much more.

THE true peak, the pinnacle of pinnacles, was hidden from us. Clouds swirled in slow circles and the summit was lost in them. The presence of that much moisture so high augured well for the condition of the atmosphere. Unless, below, it was a world of heavy, humid, unbreathable air. I can say only that from our point of vantage it didn't look it.

"Now I see," Pegleg said, "why this system was called Olympus. That's Mount Olympus out there.

The genuine article. Couldn't have named that peak after you anyhow, Johnny. It already has a name."

"Only one drawback," I agreed. "Until this moment nobody knew it was here—unless, maybe, Ursula has already had some input. She's probably been in communication with Apollo by now."

"Zeus," Pegleg corrected firmly. "Ursula doesn't deal with underlings. She'd contact the top man."

If you're beginning to suspect that we were not entirely serious you're catching on. It's the way we operate. Behind the swirling mists of our whimsical dialogue the solid structure of our real thinking lay in orderly and efficient patterns. As I watched I was automatically separating the impressive terrain into ecosystems, subconsciously groping for the best study plan. Ecology is my competence. And I knew that Pegleg, galactic geologist extraordinary, by now was analyzing the uplift with experience gained on many planets, using it to structure an insight into the history of this world that would be as valid as anything our instruments could tell us.

The same procedures were going on all over the ship. Experts in many fields had activated their expertise. Dr. James Peters, chief zoologist, would be mentally organizing his exploring and collecting teams, speculating on what the habitats in view might contain and yield. Dr. Winifred Heffelfinger, Winkie to a few of us and my choice of all the botanists who ever swung a field pick, would be readying her vascula and presses and drooling over the collecting possibilities in the varied world below. To Winkie no object was more beautiful than the bleached and desiccated carcass of a plant on an herbarium sheet, a defendable name in impeccable Latin attached. To each his own. She's still one of my favorite people.

I could list them all, meteorologists, limnologists. oceanographers, radiation specialists, communications experts, language enthusiasts, archeologists—just know that they were all aboard. None better existed in their various fields and in addition each had the unique personal stability that our strange profession requires. Earth was their birthplace, but space was their home. And would always be.

We've mentioned Ursula Potts. Even aboard the *Stardust* Ursula was different. Little, wizened, old, with strange pale eyes and a big bun of gray hair on the back of her head usually thrust full of paint brushes, Ursula looked more like a galactic hitchhiker than a valued member of the *Stardust* team. Ursula painted. And somehow those paintings revealed what our most intricate equipment did not detect. Johnny Rasmussen treated them with the same respect he gave to the most profound field report. And rightly so. With un-

canny perception they pulled together and gave more meaning to the results of a look-see.

AS THE *Stardust* swung lower around the great peak, we knew that Ursula had already extruded her transparent bubble of a studio. Seen from afar, it jutted from the ship's featureless hide like a pale parasite. And there, in radiation-shielded comfort, Ursula's magic brushes were seeing the mountain a little differently, a little more concisely than even the technical perfection of the endlessly clicking recording cameras.

"Wish those clouds would blow off a little," I said. "I sort of hanker to see what the pinnacle looks like. And we could get an accurate measurement."

"They can't blow away, Roscoe," Pegleg said. "You know that. That's where the gods live."

"You're milking a gag," I retorted. "Couldn't we use a dissipator, Johnny, and get a look at the summit while we're close?"

"I've been watching, Dr. Kissinger," Johnny Rasmussen said gravely. "Look carefully at those mists. Are they moving as clouds normally move on a mountaintop? You have experience in these things."

Trust Johnny. Nothing gets past him. I should have noticed the difference myself. The clouds swathing Mount Olumpus were moving in a tight spiral, a steady whirlwind flow, counterclockwise. Air currents just don't behave like that. And as we watched the motion grew less, the streaming clouds stabilized into huge fluffy masses, and then slowly reversed the flow.

I knew Pegleg was as surprised as any of us, but his narrow face was tranquil. "You see?" he asked.

No one came up with a good answer. The clouds speeded up the clockwise spiral, spread into bands and the bands were moving at different rates. The phenomenon wasn't all that obvious and the casual observer might not even have been aware—but there it was.

I saw Jules Griffin lean forward in his chair and press a small blue button. Nothing seemed to happen, but we all felt easier. The *Stardust* now moved behind an incredible shield of energy turned in on itself, a forcefield that would repel any power we could envision. It was almost ultimate protection. If old Zeus had chosen to hurl his thunderbolts out of those peculiar clouds three would have got you twenty that they would have bounced off us.

We made one more hundred-mile swing around the giant peak. From all over the ship sensors were focused on it, photographing, listening, probing, analyzing. Data piled up. When it was all put together, collated and organized, we would know about that mountain. Or so we thought.

THE five of us in the control room structured the drop-in, as always. If, by rare and tragic chance, Johnny Rasmussen should ever become unable to command the *Stardust* any one of the other four could take over. It had never happened. We didn't think it ever would. But we represented the foresight that made Johnny what he was. He had backups for everything, even himself.

We had been in orbit—swinging three thousand miles above the planet's surface—for the past five hours, verifying the life picture. The *Stardust's* function is the discovery and investigation of living worlds. We're getting good at it.

We know by now the properties of the suns most likely to encourage life on their satellites. And by that I mean life as we know it. We're aware of the possibilities of other types of life, with unknown chemical affinities and interactions, but they're not our concern. Curiosity has to stop somewhere. Good, carbon-centered, oxygen-respiring entities are scattered through the galaxy on a myriad worlds. We know that now. We're finding them ever more consistently. And our orderly, patterned coverage and procedure will provide a template for the planning of the inevitably wiser, more learned explorers who will follow us. But this is our heyday, our zenith. As I write these reports there are none like us anywhere.

"I think, gentlemen, that this alters our landing plans somewhat."

Johnny Rasmussen had punched for a brandy from the console by his chair. His long fingers lovingly and gently twirled the small goblet. That meant he was thinking.

"Come now, Johnny, we can't be bluffed by a cloud." Pegleg sounded outraged. I knew the mountain fascinated him.

The chief's teeth showed briefly beneath his neat mustache.

"You misunderstand, Dr. Williams. I propose a closer landing that the one agreed on. If the cloud hides what we ought to know—perhaps it would be handy to establish base nearby."

"I accept your apology for not being clear," Pegleg said gravely. "How close is closer?"

Johnny raised an eyebrow. Like all of us he lives with Pegleg's sour personality, laced through with sly, completely irreverent humor.

"Dr. Kissinger's advice would be helpful here. You're a high-country man, Roscoe. Would it be feasible to establish base above timberline—say on one of the long tundra slopes that fan out below the glaciers? There seem to be several good-looking possibilities."

"Not only feasible but desirable," I said promptly. We were all studying the slowly turning panorama below us on our viewscreens. "We'll be high enough to have every type of terrain in view—at

much better perspective than at the lakeside we had in mind. And Mount Olympus and its cloud would be right in the front yard."

"Pretty high altitude for the casual hiker, though," Pegleg reminded us. "Say fourteen to fifteen thousand feet above mean sea level. Nose-bleed country for the average citizen. I've got a feeling that people won't want to do their off-duty strolling in oxygen masks."

"Won't be necessary," I said. "You're thinking Earth again. This is Olympus Two, remember. The planet is bigger, the atmosphere much thicker. I haven't checked the data, but I'll guess that three miles up will not be far off Earth sea-level normal. Sea level here would be dense, muggy, oxygen-rich. Uh-uh. We'll all be happier up there."

"I'll join you," Pegleg said humbly. "My thinking was no clearer than Johnny's communicating. I vote for the tundra."

"Mr. Cheng?"

"Very reasonable. I am in favor."

"Captain Griffin?"

Cap'n Jules said nothing. He regards conversation as a waste of time and when he does speak he never fascinates anybody. A duller man never drew breath—conversationally, that is. But the mighty timonium engines that drive the *Stardust* in finite space wag their tails at the slightest touch of his blunt fingers and he is one of the very few man alive who can implement Ultraspan. Now he simply raised his right hand, joined the thumb and index finger.

II

WE PUT our heads together, picked our stretch of rolling high-country meadow and Cap'n Jules guided the *Stardust* in, her fifteen hundred feet of glistening bulk gliding to a full-length landing as gracefully as a bit of thistledown drifting down a sunbeam. No savage outpourings of braking energy. No shuddering, jarring loss of acceleration. These things are only history now. The great ship's thousands of tons of mass were completely nullified by her new timonium antigravs. We experienced no sense of landing at all. We simply ceased to move. And around us the tundra swept away, gray and brown and red and yellow with lichens, bright with wide stretches of short-stemmed high-country flowers.

Johnny Rasmussen murmured into a microphone. Shortly the ship's intercom came alive, rumbled and cleared its throat. Stony Price, communications chief, always read the landing communique.

"The *Stardust* has landed. Olympus Two awaits us. Whether or not it's with open arms or an open mouth remains to be seen. All data indicate a compatible world, but

final checks remain to be made. Dr. Rasmussen suggests that tentative reconnaissance patterns be adjusted to our present location, fifteen thousand two hundred feet above mean sea level. There are reasons for this. Don't blame me. You'll be notified when checks are completed. Meanwhile feast your eyes on Mount Olympus."

"Open mouth," Pegleg growled. "Stony's the one with the open mouth."

"You do hate competition," I said. "Look at your viewscreen and be glad. There are more rocks out there than we've found for you in the last five landings. Count your blessings. Take what the gods provide."

"Oh, I'm humbly grateful," Pegleg said. He eyed the viewscreen, then looked quizzically at me. "As for the gods—I see no reason why we shouldn't thank them personally since we're going to live next door."

Once Pegleg gets an idea he worries it. And inevitably I am involved. Since we're both essentially field men and our areas of concern overlap we usually work together. Always have. With many people a little of Pegleg goes a long way, but we complement each other neatly. I've loosened up a lot of tight places for him and there have been times when I've been mighty grateful to be backed up by the cold nerve and lancing laser of Pegleg Williams.

Successful drop-in completed, we left Control to Cap'n Jules, who sat as stolidly as a stone man in his master's chair. I've often wondered what he thinks about as he sits like that, white head erect, pale eyes vacant. But the results are good. As long as we have Cap'n Jules and Moe Cheng, logistics will never be a worry.

PEGLEG and I strolled the corridor complex, headed for our respective labs. A door opened and the most beautiful woman I have ever seen came through. Tall, graceful, with a magnificent figure, fine, clean-planed features, live green eyes and red curls tumbling to her shoulders—in the galaxy there couldn't be another like her. I reached out an arm, pulled her to me and gave her the kind of kiss a man should give to a woman like that. Or as near as I could manage. She clung to me for a moment, then slowly pushed my arms away. Her green eyes danced.

"Roscoe," she said. "What will the neighbors say?"

"Disgusting," said Pegleg.

I've been married to her for nine Earth years. They seem like nine weeks. Ultraspan stages into the depths of the galaxy, to nerve-grinding episodes on strange worlds—these are only the commonplace occurrences of day-to-day living as long as I have Lindy. With her, anywhere in the universe is home.

She's not just Mrs. Kissinger. Dr. Linda Peterson was the first and is the only microbiologist the *Stardust* has ever had. No one can approach her knowledge of galactic microforms. And no foot is placed on a new world until Lindy's report is in Johnny's hands and he has analyzed it carefully. The *Stardust* could not do without her any more than I could.

I could tell by her relaxed smile that her sampling chores were already well in hand. And that the news was probably good. She strolled down the corridor with us, her fingers twined with mine.

"Well," said Pegleg, "don't hold out. Any nasty little varmints in the air? Looks like a pretty good deal out there. Don't spoil it if you can help it."

"The girls are running final checks," Lindy said. "Give them another thirty minutes. At this altitude at least everything looks clear." She looked from me to Pegleg. "Speaking of altitude, whose idea was it to set down halfway up a mountain range? I don't suppose Roscoe's love affair with tundras or your everlasting yen for base rocks had anything to do with it."

"No scientist jumps to conclusions." Pegleg oozed disdain. "You do. Johnny thought this up all by himself. We just agreed with him."

My wife turned to me.

"I'm a simple person, so he

makes no sense to me. What gives, Roscoe?"

I grinned and squeezed her fingers.

"He's reporting correctly. It was Johnny's idea, all right. There's something funny about the big peak out there and we want to take an extended look."

"Mount Olympus," Pegleg explained gravely. "The gods are holding high carnival behind those clouds on the summit. We want to crash the party."

Lindy looked amused. Whatever she is, she's not a simple person.

"Won't that be a mite risky? I seem to remember that mortals in the past have never been the same after going up into those clouds."

"They didn't have scoutboats or lasers or dissipators," Pegleg said. "I think we can get a hearing. Never forget that everything we do is a first, anyhow."

"Oh, good," Lindy said. "I've always wanted to interview Aphrodite. For the benefit of the uninformed among us, she is the goddess of love."

Pegleg looked outraged. "I know, I know."

"Maybe," Lindy added reflectively, "I can find out what she's got that I haven't got."

"I can answer that," I said. "Nothing."

Pegleg shrugged.

"You should know," he said.

Now all this may sound sharp, brittle, even on the edge of silly to you. It wasn't. Behind the nonsense good friends and co-workers were simply catching up on the news. It's just that you probably don't do it that way.

LINDY and I were back in our quarters when finally the intercom awoke again.

"Dr. Rasmussen's communique, official." Stony Price reporting. We talk to Stony all the time, but we rarely see him. Usually he's just a cheerful, irreverent voice. "Olympus Two is compatible. Atmosphere at this altitude comparable to Earth sea-level normal. Life varied, but no evidence of thinking forms. Usual precautions against unknown aggressive or predacious entities. Seventy-two hours free reconnaissance, at the end of which time all major research heads will meet to structure the survey pattern. Whew!" Stony heaved a sigh. "All those big words. That is all."

We had anticipated the procedure and were ready. As usual, my first reconnaissance would be simple. I would go out, take a good leg-stretching hike across that inviting tundra, adjust to the gravity, get used to the feel of alien air in my lungs. I would find an elevation that would give me the widest, most sweeping view and I would sit there, looking, orienting, soaking up this spectacular environment. And I would have a good feeling that such sights could be seen, probably in

infinite variety, on many favored worlds throughout the galaxy.

I would know a twinge of sadness, too, that on Earth they had almost disappeared.

The personnel ports were activated and we went out past the guards onto the lichen-sheathed high plains that stretched away in all directions. Lindy was with me. She comes when she can. And after a series of Ultraspan stages everyone was eager for the feel of the substrate, of the solid planet that is, after all, our normal abode.

We didn't bounce about. Gravity was somewhat greater than Earth normal and our feet felt heavy. We plodded along. Our lungs expanded with the good, oxygen-rich air. After a mile I was on my toes again. I've stretched my legs on a number of worlds. This one was superior, more majestic, than most.

"Do you think," Lindy panted, "that if I keep this up it will make a woman of me? Ease up, Roscoe. Don't forget, I'm one of God's gentler creatures."

We finally stood on a high, round-topped knoll finished off with with scattered, smooth-worn boulders. I boosted Lindy to a comfortable seat. The world lay beneath us for miles. But great peaks towered high beyond the lowlands and over them all rose the vast massif of Mount Olympus, its upper reaches swathed in those strange clouds. It was beautiful and mind-stretching.

OUR field glasses swept a wide panorama. Beside the glinting, featureless cylinder of the *Stardust* people moved like ants, spreading out over the terrain. Portals yawned as we watched and three scoutboats were spat from them like torpedoes. Probably meteorologists, geographers, mapping experts. Few people were actually doing much work. It was orientation time.

Perhaps ten miles away a darting, zig-zagging speck was resolved by the glasses into Pegleg's jeep, obviously headed for a spectacular red wall that reared beyond.

A tiny red dot out on a slope beyond the ship was Ursula Potts' red umbrella. On compatible worlds she forsakes her little studio and paints in the open, always shielded by that spot of color. We knew that her easel was up, her paraphernalia strewn about her and that she had begun a program that would occupy her every waking hour until lift-off.

"Off to the right, up high, coming down the wind, Roscoe—" Lindy's restless binoculars had picked up the first motile life. I swung up my own glasses.

"Typical," I said. "Big country, big flying predator. Something to feed on whatever in turn eats the tundra vegetation. Could be a variety of plant eaters around—they're probably hiding because so many of us are out."

More of the soaring raptores

appeared. In the shifting air currents and thermal chimneys of a bright afternoon they swung and glided high against the slopes of the peaks. None came close. We knew they were watching this strange invasion with the telescopic eyes such forms always have.

That evolution here had proceded along Earthlike lines was less surprising to us than it would have been some years before. Although much of the life we have found has been unpredictably different, some patterns seem to recur again and again.

We spent an hour on our knoll, no one else near. We sat quietly and gradually small life came out all around us. Small rodentlike forms peered from rock piles and darted hastily from place to place through the bright tundra blowers. Minute insectlike creatures swarmed. And what appeared to be a red dragonfly, three or four inches in wingspan, crouched on rocks with spread wings and twitching eyes or coursed low back and forth over the tundra, feeding.

Ever and anon we transferred our attention to the big peak, to Mount Olympus. Its cloud-shrouded summit seemed to thrust through the sky above us. The highest "eagle" our glasses could show still soared far below those clouds.

FROM the first I never had much doubt that those clouds were being manipulated. And that meant that this was not the primitive world it seemed. There was a technology here, perhaps elaborate, and a superior race or races of living things. I wasn't sure whether I was sorry or glad. I enjoy the contacts with alien minds—but I love the primitive worlds, too. The earlier stages in the evolutionary sequence are my special concern. It is here, before any form has become aware, that ecosystems are most perfect. Their checks and balances operate with beautiful efficiency, an inevitability that enables populations to vary, to adjust, to progress. Here the pattern of evolution is most clear.

"Pegleg will be disappointed," Lindy remarked as we strolled slowly back toward the ship.

"A common occurrence," I said, "but why this time? This looks like the place where geologists go when they die. What more could he possibly want?"

Lindy giggled. When another woman makes a sound like that you think it's silly. But any sound she makes is a part of Lindy.

"He meant exactly what he said when he spoke of crashing Zeus's party. He intended to take a scout, use a dissipator on those clouds and expose the whole enigma to the public gaze. Now I imagine that Johnny will rule that he can't do it."

I saw her point.

"ISC ruling. No interference with the organization or the activi-

ties of aware forms. He'll have to prove that the swirling clouds are simply meteorological oddities, or agree that intellects are operating them. In which case he can only be a spectator. Pegleg hates that." I turned back for another look at the Olympian nightcap and it was well I did. Things were happening.

The characteristic rotation of the cloud mass had slowed to a crawl. I thought for a moment that it was beginning to break up, but matters were not that simple. Fleecy puffs were blowing out from the bands, floating gently for a few minutes, then slowly dissipating. There were dozens of them. They seemed random, but by now I knew that wasn't likely.

"Patterned," Lindy said. "Meaningful to somebody—or something. Could be anything from a calling up of the Home Guard to a call to prayer. I'll guess that it won't last long."

It didn't. After a few minutes the cloud mass had speeded up again and no longer gave off the puffs.

"End of message," I said. "Thirty. Over and out. Now all we have to do is to figure out whether or not we were the reasons for that. As if we didn't know."

"Likely," Lindy agreed. "Still, the mechanism was operating before we got here. That may happen every day at this time.

"Remotely controlled?" I suggested. "It would not be too probable that living things are actually up there. And if that's so, then somewhere we've got concentrations of intelligent life. I'm beginning to be challenged."

"You may not like them," Lindy warned. "We're butting in as usual. They would be justified in resenting us. Sometimes we do forget that."

"Still," I decided, "I'm favorably disposed so far. They keep a nice place here. Haven't messed it up. Air's good, water's pure, no unsightly artifacts. Smart people."

Lindy's beautiful face reflected tolerant amusement. That's one of her secrets. She lets me know she appreciates me, no matter how corny I get.

"You're chopping up your sentences like Ursula," she said.

We both glanced down the long slope to the little red dot on the tundra. I'm sure we both had the same idea at the same time.

"Speaking of whom," I said, "why don't we go down and see? She'll have an idea. Always does."

"Stop it," Lindy ordered. "One person on the *Stardust* who talks like that is enough."

NOT many people dare interrupt Ursula at work. She paints with a fierce concentration, seeing, I'm sure, not only what is before her, but meanings hidden from less sensitive mortals. And those meanings, too, appear in the sometimes strange, always com-

pelling products of her art. This uncanny second sight, plus Ursula's abrupt impatience with pedantry, has given rise to the witch rumor. But we are enlightened people. We know witches never existed—I think.

We knew she saw and heard us approach, but she gave no sign. She simply painted. Her fingers unerringly selected the brush she wanted from the collection—thrust handle-end first through the big bun on the back of her head. When she finished with the brush she thrust it back in at any angle. The loose sleeves of the old sweater she always wore, inside or out, hot planet or cold, flopped with her crisp, sure strokes. The easel was in sunlight. Ursula sat on her campstool just under the shadow of the big red umbrella.

We watched for a few minutes, a practically unpardonable sin for most people. But we're special. Ursula had been with us, Lindy and Pegleg and me, at Armageddon on Cyrene IV. She knows that we know the lonely old woman behind that acid tongue and the strange pale eyes. She knows we're fond of her.

Suddenly she decided to recognize our existence. She thrust the brush into her hair with finality and spun on her stool.

"Out of a job, eh? A whole planet—and nothing to do?"

"You know better than that, Ursula," I said. "I'm always working. Up here." And I tapped my forehead.

Ursula actually grinned.

"Hard to prove." She made a sweeping gesture that included half the great mountain range. "What do you think, Roscoe?"

"Good country," I said tentatively. "A variety of life forms, but probably no thinking beings. Pretty typical tundra, but on a grand scale. I like."

Ursula sniffed.

"Dodging the problems. What makes the clouds go around?"

"Give me time," I protested. We've only been here three hours. Besides, I thought you'd know."

"More complex than it looks." Ursula narrowed her strange eyes. "Feel more than we see. All I know—so far." She indicated the painting on the easel.

She hadn't even painted the big mountain. The canvas showed simply a stretch of tundra. Sometimes her paintings are vague, impressionistic, expressing mood rather than the actual substance of her subject. But this picture was not like that. It was specific, almost photographically detailed. Even the several kinds of lichens were easily distinguished. Three different small rodents peered from behind rocks. We had seen each of them up the slope. On a rock a red dragonfly sat, complete to the greenish iridescence of its huge eyes.

In the upper corner of the paint-

ing, against the sky, soared one of the wide-winged eagles. Every flower was recognizable. My eyes pick up and my brain records such details automatically. There was only one creature on the canvas that I didn't recognize. Lindy pointed it out.

"He's cute," she said. "Just like a coon, Roscoe."

It really was. It was in the middle distance in the scene and only partially in sight, as though it peered over a little roll in the terrain. It didn't have a raccoon's mask, but the ears, the pointed muzzle, the alert black eyes, all reminded us of the little Earth mammal. In fact, Ursula's genius really showed in those bright eyes. They had a knowing look. The two forelimbs were visible. They ended in a raccoon's babylike hands.

"We missed that fellow," I said. "Where did you see him, Ursula?"

"Didn't," Ursula said.

"Then why is he there?"

"Don't know. Just seemed to belong there. Painted him in before I thought."

"That's faking," I said.

"Doubt it. Scene doesn't look right without him."

It had happened before. In fact, it happened all the time. Ursula doesn't just see with her eyes. Call that eerie sixth sense what you will, Ursula has it. We had had enough experience, Lindy and I, to recognize what we were seeing. When we talked it over we agreed that, sooner or later, we would see that little animal in the flesh.

AS IT happened, it was sooner. The following morning, in fact. And the creature was not out on the tundra. It was in a small cage brought in triumphantly by one of Jim Peters' young trappers. Like all of us, Jim has his own reconnaissance methods. And the live trap is his mainstay.

When we establish a wilderness base, as now, an area near the spaceship pretty quickly becomes a menagerie. The zoologists set up shelters against sun and wind and cagefuls of all kinds of creatures accumulate. The rest of us learn simply by visiting Jim's zoo. Jim watches and analyzes and feeds while his teams of collectors range far and wide. By day and by night his strings and traps sample a region's life.

One of Jim's most consistent visitors is always Lindy. I never saw the living thing she couldn't make friends with. It's a gift, as uncanny in its way as Ursula's weird awareness. If there's such a thing as an universal sociologist, Lindy qualifies. Everything trusts her. I don't try to understand it. I'm simply proud.

"There he is, Roscoe."

The plastic awnings and shelters were going up and the first rows of cages were being put into place. The coonlike creature sat in

its wire enclosure, seeming to watch everything with bright-eyed interest.

Close-up, it was not as small as it had looked on Ursula's picture. I would have guessed it ran thirty, thirty-five pounds. Earth weight. On Olympus Two it was probably a bit more. It looked us over thoroughly when we approached. It wasn't frightened, but it was never still. Its sharp nose twitched. Its restless black hands clasped and unclasped. It continually touched itself all over its furry gray-and-black body, sometimes using only a single finger, sometimes both hands together. Even its brushy tail moved constantly, forming a series of patterns on the ground as it sat.

"Busy little fellow, isn't he?" My conversation was less than sparkling, but I felt I had to say something.

"More than busy," Lindy said gravely. "Purposeful. All that twitching isn't just nervous temperament. There's a functional reason for it."

"A good imagination is always helpful," I said, but I studied the creature carefully just the same. It doesn't do to discount Lindy's serious comments. And after a few minutes I admitted: "He looks like a third-base coach going through his routine to give the batter his sign. Are you saying he's trying to tell us something?"

Lindy smiled. "I always knew all that baseball would come in handy in some remote future. That's just what he looks like. Watch."

She went down on her shapely knees directly in front of the cage and began to make a series of random motions, holding up fingers, touching various parts of her body, shrugging, even winking in patterns.

"You're handicapped," I pointed out. "You haven't got a bushy tail."

"Quiet. Think positively. If a typewriter is missing a couple of letters, you can still read what it writes."

My wife was behaving like a charming idiot. She worked out a simple routine and went through it again and again. And she was getting results. The coon was fascinated. He stopped his own motions entirely and when Lindy paused he made a swift gesture, then put both black hands over his eyes.

"No savvy," I said. "You're talking nonsense. That's plain as plain."

"Maybe," Lindy said. "Let's prove it."

When, after a moment, the coon went back to his endless touching and twitching, Lindy made his gesture and put her hands over her own eyes. It worked. The coon was baffled. That he recognized the signals was beyond doubt. And for the first time he simply sat

and stared at us steadily. We could almost see him think.

LINDY rose to her feet, brushing the dust from her knees.

"In a relatively brief time we have gathered some very significant data," she said. "Summarize, please."

I grinned. It's a game we play.

"Item," I began. "Pegleg definitely can't dissipate the clouds on Mount Olympus, because they are artificially produced by aware beings."

"Possible," Lindy said, "but still not proved. You can do better than that."

"Item. Jim Peters has violated an International Space Council ruling by interfering with an aware species. At this very moment has one of its members incarcerated and in durance vile."

"Quite likely," Lindy agreed. "So far no great harm has been done and he can be forgiven on grounds of ignorance. More?"

"Item. Communication on this world is more visual than auditory, perhaps completely visual. And the cloud patterns on Mount Olympus and the monkey motions of this little varmint in the cage are both parts of an elaborate system of keeping up with the news around the world and the juicy doings of the neighbors.

"Now—I'm proud of you," Lindy said with satisfaction. "We're probably oversimplifying, but I do believe we've got the key, Roscoe. Let's go talk with Johnny."

We were on our way, but we only got to the edge of the shelter. Two of the young trappers were just arriving, each with a cage—and each cage held another coon.

"Good hunting, Eric," I said. "Where are you catching these fellows? I haven't even seen one free. What's their habitat?"

"No idea, Dr. Kissinger. We haven't seen one either. These were in traps on the open tandra. No bait. They just walked in."

"Knowing full well what they were walking into, I bet. What better way to get into our setup without attracting the wrong kind of attention?" Lindy was obviously pleased with herself.

The big blond zoologist was puzzled.

"Coons are always curious, Dr. Peterson," he explained. "They investigate. These little guys would naturally explore something new."

Lindy shook her red curls.

"This isn't Earth," she pointed out, "and no matter what they look like, those aren't coons. I'll bet you a chocolate ice-cream soda they're here because they want to be here."

The men set down the cages. We all stood watching the composed, busy occupants. They were twitching, touching and wig-wagging at a great rate, undoubtedly talking us over. By now there was no doubt in my mind that they knew exactly what they were doing.

"No bet, Dr. Peterson," Eric said after a moment. "Not even for a finger or two of that Tennessee bourbon you've got hoarded. You have information we don't."

"We're guessing," I said. "But they're educated guesses. Put these two animals over there with the other one and watch."

What followed was predictable. Tails twitched, eyes rolled, black fingers flew as apparently everybody talked at once. And when, after a few minutes, they got caught up with the news—everybody stopped. Each animal retired to a corner of its cage, crouched into a comfortable ball and sat watching, black eyes darting alertly.

Lindy and I strolled out slowly and you may be sure they watched us go. At the shelter's edge Lindy turned, went through a swift series of motions with both hands and ended by sticking out her tongue. It was silly—and a little uncanny, too—to see all three animals make the same gesture, then cover their eyes with their hands.

PEGLEG is nothing if not persistent, so he did exactly what I knew he would do. He had reserved a scoutboat and pilot "for geological reconnaissance along the Olympic Range" and, by his seniority, had grounded one set of cloud chasers. I heard them grumbling about it. But the request was legitimate and Pegleg never hogged equipment.

Mount Olympus challenged him. And nothing does that to Pegleg and gets away with it. Not even a mountain. Especially not a mountain. And if this particular jumble of cliffs and pinnacles and obscuring clouds was going to have secrets, Pegleg intended to find them out or know the reason why.

The silvery silver of the scoutboat drifted slowly over me as I sat on a high prominence, doing the kind of research I like to do best. Just sitting and looking. That way I don't disturb anything—life goes on normally and my binoculars can pick up any activity from horizon to horizon. And in this spectacular setting that took in a lot of territory. My jumper sat nearby.

"Any word for Zeus, Roscoe? Or for Aphrodite, maybe?"

Pegleg spoke down the tight auditory cone that can be projected from a scoutboat. He sounded as if he were standing beside me. I thumbed my belt communicator switch. The cone is one-way.

"Carry my regrets," I said. "Previous engagement and all that. Be careful, Pegleg."

I knew he would be. Pegleg is ornery and pig-headed, but his sense of self-preservation is as highly developed as that of anybody I know. He had been careless only once—and he would remember it forever. He had lost his leg on that occasion—it was bitten off smooth by a plesiosaur-type critter on a planet that's not among my

pleasanter memories. His plastic leg works almost as well as the original—but it is a reminder.

The scoutboat picked up momentum and swept into a great wide ellipse around the lower reaches of the mountain of the gods. Pegleg was going to take a deliberate, leisurely look-see. But he would be able to move if he had to. A scoutboat can flash over the horizon in one blink of an eye.

I watched him disappear behind the great bulk of the uplift. When he reappeared a few minutes later on the other side he had appreciably gained altitude. But eagles still looked down on the scoutboat. Almost casually it spiraled upward, loop after loop, and each time it reappeared it was closer to the slowly revolving bands of clouds.

I could imagine what Pegleg was doing. The photographic record he was making would be careful and complete. When he reached the cloud belts he would use radar and infrared light. He wouldn't disturb the clouds. Dissipators were out—*verboten*. We had cleared all that up in a long conference with Johnny Rasmussen. But there was no ruling against looking and Pegleg intended to look. Swathed in its forcefield, the scoutboat would stare Zeus in the eye if it got the chance.

It seemed to me that the cloud bands grew fluffier, thicker, and that they moved more deliberately, more naturally, as the scoutboat came nearer. Camouflage? Were they trying to pretend that they were normal clouds? From my vantage point the little ship was now so tiny that I had to put my glasses on full zoom to see it at all. The highest of the eagles was far below it.

I SUPPOSE Pegleg planned it that way. Anyhow, he was on my side of the mountain when the scoutboat drifted against the highest cloudbank, nosed into it and disappeared. There was no agitation, no turmoil. The scoutboat was simply swallowed up.

I saw no cause for alarm. Pegleg didn't need direct visibility. His radar was sensitive and good and he could throttle down to less than ten miles an hour if he had to. His forcefield would protect him. In point of fact, we've always had such overwhelming superiority over any and all life forms we've found that adventure, as far as hazard is concerned, is largely taken out. But there's no guarantee. Pegleg had lost his leg.

So, in spite of myself, I found my palms wet as minute followed minute and the scoutboat did not emerge. Once in a while I forgot to breathe.

I knew that the big telescopes in the *Stardust* were watching, that a finely tuned radar was on the scoutboat, continuing to "see" it in the obscuring clouds. The distance was too great for metabolic probes,

but Pegleg had a setup on board the scoutboat that was monitoring automatically. If life existed behind the clouds on the peak he would pick it up.

The next development wasn't much. Not very much. Just—the clouds turned pink.

I saw no evidence of violence, no indication of concentrated energy release. The cloudbelt into which the scoutboat vanished simply began to glow as if touched by a ray of sunlight. The color deepened until the whole band looked like a rosy coronet on the vast brow of the mountain. The band speeded up, emitted several series of pink puffs—it seemed to oscillate, to expand and contract as it revolved. The sight was spectacular, but not awesome. There was no menace in it. And in the middle of the display the scoutboat darted into view again.

Pegleg spiraled high, cut patterns above the loftiest clouds, above the hidden pinnacle. His behavior indicated neither annoyance nor anger. He was still just gathering data. And after a few sweeps the scoutboat pointed its nose at my lookout and began to grow steadily larger. It checked and drifted as it reached me. The whole reconnaissance had taken scarcely an hour.

"Come on down the hill, Roscoe," Pegleg said. "We've got conferring to do. You'll be interested."

"Will do." I spoke as though mountains that generated pink clouds were an everyday experience. But I set the jumper on a flat trajectory, fifty yards at a leap, and by the time the scoutboat was back in its cradle I was landing on my jumper platform, extruded high on the *Stardust's* metallic side.

LINDY had not been able to stay away from the "raccoon" cages. Once her own reconnaissance pattern had been set up in the lab her assistants could do the work—she had gravitated instantly to the isolated shelter Jim Peters had arranged for the coons. The animals were different. She had been learning how and, hopefully, why.

She had watched them, bombarding them with body pats and wigwags, eye rolls and nose twitches. Since these had no meanings, the little animals were at first continually giving the "don't understand" signal. This very fact had reinforced her conviction that the creatures were intelligent, aware, and were indeed communicating with each other in a complicated, soundless sign language.

After the conference I went searching for my wife and found her with the coons. She had recruited powerful assistance. Ursula had moved in from the tundra. Her red umbrella was set up beside the awning that sheltered the cages. But she wasn't painting. She had a sketch pad across her skinny knees

and with a bit of charcoal made swift sketches, one after another, tearing them from the pad and dropping them. The ground around her was littered with them.

Although Pegleg and I had news of our own, we stood by and watched while she and Lindy worked. There was evidently a pattern. They had something in mind.

They ignored us while Lindy gathered up the sketches, sorted them, arranged them in sequences. I could see that each was only a few lines, but those lines cleverly indicated a coon giving a signal. No two were alike.

When Lindy finished her sorting she faced the cages and began to hold up the sketches, one by one. One or two she used over and over. The little animals watched with round-eyed attention. There was no possible doubt that they knew exactly what she was trying to do. And when she finished all three of them suddenly threw themselves on the ground and rolled about, aimlessly kicking out with their little black feet and lashing their bushy tails. Their faces wore no expressions, but I think we all got it at once. They were laughing.

"The pen of my aunt is on the elephant's back. Your signals are nonsense. They think you're funny," I said.

"You told them a dirty joke," said Pegleg. "They're embarrassed.

"In either case I couldn't care less," Lindy said with satisfaction. "I didn't expect meaningful communication. I just wanted to verify the fact of thought transfer. And I wanted them to know we know."

"I imagine they already suspected that," I said. "So where do we go from here?"

Ursula was sketching again, apparently from memory. But this time she used a paint brush. Under her skilled fingers a recognizable outline of the mountain grew, its crest swathed with bands of pink clouds, pink puffs blowing from them. She held it up for the coons to see.

This means of communication must have been marvelous to them, those lines and colors that looked like the thing itself. I still doubted that they handled equipment or tools themselves, although the small hands looked capable and versatile. They recognized the mountain, though. They grasped that we understood that the cloud patterns had meaning—that they were artificially formed. The round eyes stared at the sketch briefly and then they showed a human trait—they knew how to lie. They all made the swift motion of negation and covered their eyes with their hands.

FOR the second time in two days Ursula grinned—an almost unprecedented occurrence.

"Fibbing," she said.

"Why?" asked Pegleg.

"No idea. Can guess, though. They're involved."

"Something taboo about it," I suggested. "Could little varmints like these have a sense of the supernatural? Could they respond to orders from a mysterious source? Could they have a religion?"

"Could it be they're being exploited? Are they being flimflammed? Same difference." Pegleg spoke from his own specialized point of view. He rarely lets us down. If he has a good word for something we're disappointed.

Lindy winked at me.

"Still there abideth in the world these three; suspicion, prejudice and cynicism. And the greatest of these is cynicism."

Pegleg's narrow face showed no contrition.

"You forget," he said. "I am in possession of very recent data. I've been up where the gods were supposed to be." He shook his head sadly. "The whole bit is a big fat double-cross. There ain't no gods up there."

"Just unusual meteorological phenomena?" I prodded. I knew what he had found, of course.

"Oh no. The clouds are artificial, just as advertised. I analyzed a big sample. Mostly water vapor, as you'd suspect, but with some kind of stuff intermingled with it that makes a tough film. The chemists are playing with it. The clouds are actually masses of tiny stable bubbles that break down very slowly. The pink was a pigment suspended among the bubbles. Very neat setup. Efficient and business-like."

"Had metabolic probes, didn't you? No life?" Ursula's strange eyes gleamed.

Pegleg grinned.

"Got your attention, did I? No life high up. Plenty farther down the mountain, but in variety—as you'd expect. Nothing too predominant." He paused and studied the little animals in the cages. They were busily discussing us—or so I presumed—among themselves. "No, the clouds came from apertures in the central pinnacle, whole clusters of them. Stuff's probably piped up from far below. Engineering job. How the thing is done I can't imagine, but you can bet that it isn't by the likes of them. Ergo, they're being given the business."

"Reasonable," I agreed, "but there's another side. What about the hypothesis that they're here to check us out? That they're doing the same thing here that you were doing up on the peak? They don't know how the *Stardust* functions either—but I'll give you odds they know what it is and what it does."

"Until we learn their sign patterns we can't be sure," Pegleg said. "I'll grant, though, that beings that can lie are civilized. It's an infallible indication."

"—and the greatest of these is—" Lindy didn't finish repeating

her paraphrase. "I'll learn the signs. Since apparently they can't make sound we can't teach them speech. We'll have to go with their way of communicating."

"At least it's peaceful," I observed. "Imagine a noiseless human race."

"Even sex-linked. Wow—noiseless males! Definitely an improvement," Ursula grunted.

That settled that. Pegleg and I left the ladies to their machinations. We knew when we had worn out our welcome.

IV

ATTENTION, all research directive and supervisory personnel. Dr. Rasmussen requests the pleasure of your company at dinner, this date, black tie, appetizers at eighteen hundred hours. My advice—take him up on it. You got to eat somewhere."

Of all the announcements he's called on to make I think Stony Price enjoys the chief's dinner invitations best. And to my knowledge he's never yet read one straight.

I had expected the dinner. One was due for several reasons. Periodically Johnny likes to see us at our best. To him that means trimmed, shaved and in dinner dress. He can envision no crime to compare with a poorly cut dinner jacket. He loves fine food, properly served, and feels that every civilized man should. He reserves his ultimate respect for a superior brandy.

The above would justify the dinner, but Johnny's invitations always had an additional reason. This was rarely announced and there have been times when I never found out what it was. Still, after you got past the starchy beginnings, the dinners were enjoyable in themselves. Nobody ever missed one.

"Don't be surprised," Lindy said, "if the dinner conversation takes an ecumenical turn. Pegleg, for one, is still not sure the gods don't exist."

"He's sure they do," I said. "He simply suspects their motives. I do fear that he thinks they rate power and profit over salvation. But he's interested in how they operate."

"Thus lumping them with all the religions he has known in the past." Lindy laughed. "Here, zip me. I'll exhale."

It was a pleasure. I meshed the magnetic fastenings up her shapely back, enclosing her in a softly glowing white sheath that fitted only a little less perfectly than her skin. Blue slippers were on her feet, a blue orchid at her left shoulder, long blue pendants swung from her earlobes and her green eyes looked from under shadowed upper lids. Atop her regal head the red curls were piled in a spectacular coiffure that is always, somehow, uniquely fitting.

No woman will ever be like my woman.

"I hope," I said, "that Johnny hasn't seated you across from me. I'll forget to eat."

"Then for your sake," Lindy said gravely, "I hope so, too. You certainly need your food."

If ever solicitude was suspect, that was. You know what I look like. Thick-armed, thick-legged, barrel-chested, all visible areas covered with black hair except my face and the top of my head. Even above the dinner jacket Johnny requires, my rudely cut features look harsh, out of place. But a man can't help how he appears. He can only hope that somewhere there's a woman who can see past such things. There I've been lucky.

DR. WILLIAMS, Dr. Frost, Miss Potts, Dr. Kissinger, Dr. Peterson—" Johnny Rasmussen stood behind his chair at the head of the long curving table, tall, immaculate, elegant, and pronounced our names with evident relish. He finished and said, "I am delighted to have you here this evening. Won't you please be seated?"

It was routine, formula. We could have chanted it with him. The only thing that changed was the seating. Johnny arranged that, always to suit some devious purpose of his own. Sometimes I could figure it out. Just as often, not.

Chairs scraped and the conversational hum began to build. Johnny had put Pegleg on his right, a thing he would do only because he needed him for some reason. Pegleg's caustic conversation was incompatible with the genteel small talk behind which the chief masked his thoughts and gathered his information. But the two of them chatting like old buddies as the soup came and empty bowls went. A hearty tossed green salad, grown in the *Stardust's* own hydroponic rooms, appeared and was sampled. And finally the entree. That, too, was homegrown. Crab imperial. Honest. On Earth the Chesapeake Blue Crab is no more—its ancestral home is a cesspool of industrial wastes. But in the growing section of our space home, in three carefully managed tanks, *Callinectes sapidus* goes through its life cycle just as it has since it evolved and provides, from time to time, a succulent harvest for special events such as these.

I divided my attention between Lindy and Ursula Potts. Ursula's dinner dress was an unrelieved gunmetal gray and her bun, neat for once, seemed almost to blend into its prim high collar. She wore a massive emerald on her right forefinger—an emerald not of Earth—and her favorite necklace of polished scarlet seeds from some planet we had visited. She was small and scrawny, but she matched me bite for bite. She scooped it in like a lumberjack.

"Pegleg's in the catbird seat tonight," I remarked. "Any idea why?"

Ursula's strange eyes flicked.

"Johnny's picking his brains," she said. "Good at it, too. Would have to be, with Pegleg."

"But why here? He could get what he needs from Pegleg's report."

Ursula's thin lips savored a forkful of crab.

"Not looking for what he remembers. Looking for what wouldn't go into a report. Intangibles."

I nodded as I scraped my crab shells. They had served me two, but I could have done with one more.

"The gods began as a joke. I guess they're not anymore. Somewhere under the mountain old Zeus, no matter what his form, does hold court. It took know-how to pipe the inside of a forty-thousand-foot peak. And why? For whom are the messages?"

"Johnny's questions, too, I think. That's why we're getting rare food tonight. Reminding us of the general emphasis. Whatever else we do, look for Zeus."

"You think he'll make an announcement?"

Ursula shook her head.

"Won't say a word. We're supposed to have brains. Put two and two together."

I knew she was right. That was the way Johnny operated. He wouldn't tell us what to do. He would expect us to know. And somehow we always did.

I turned to my other dinner companion. We were holding hands under the table.

"You're looking nice tonight," I remarked. "What can you tell us about Zeus?"

"I expect to see him," Lindy said. She surveyed my plate. "I didn't take your appetite after all."

My smile is not a handsome production, but Lindy likes it.

"Even left-handed," I said, "a man must keep up his strength."

It was a good evening. After the coffee and just a dash of a pale golden brandy some of us adjourned to the big main lounge and sat and yarned until the unfamiliar patterns of stars on the viewscreens began to dim with the approach of morning. Without saying it, everyone was agreed. The unifying objective of this look-see had crystallized. It was—the identity and the nature of the gods on Mount Olympus.

RANDOM reconnaissance was over. The scoutboats were scheduled for days in advance as research units prowled up and down the mighty range for thousands of miles. Jumper teams fanned out, some probing deep into the valleys and canyons among the peaks, others working their way down through the vast forests into the dense and soggy atmosphere of lower elevations.

I stayed nearby. It wasn't that I didn't want to go anywhere. I felt that I was already somewhere—that here on the shoulder of the big peak was where the action was likely to be. For nowhere was there evidence of advanced technology, no sign of beings that might be aware. None, that is, except the three little coons in their cages. And three seemed to be all there were going to be. No more were caught.

By now, though, I knew they were common. Fleeting glimpses were reported by various field teams. I had caught brief views myself. In every case the animal had vanished quickly, presumably underground, but there were no evidences of burrows. Not, that is, until I figured it out.

They were watching us. I was sure of that. And whenever I sat and surveyed and made notes I looked for them with the same casual air that I've found to work so well with other life forms. When one finally showed himself I knew exactly what to do.

He disappeared the minute I moved. I knew he would. I went directly to the spot where I had last seen him, raised the stone behind which he had vanished. It belied its solid, half-buried appearance. It was pumice light and under it was the burrow entrance.

I did nothing about it. The tunnel angled sharply away from the opening and I was not so naive as to think that the little beast was trapped. That tunnel led into a maze under the tundra. Somehow I knew it was so. I didn't even report my find. I could see no point in having scores of people prowling the tundra, tipping over stones, setting traps at burrow entrances and otherwise alerting the odd little creatures that we knew where they were.

For they were aware. They thought. They comprehended. How extensively, how deeply, I didn't know. But Lindy had learned many symbols of their sign language. She could greet them, ask them simple questions. They could return the greeting, evade the questions and ask others of their own. Lindy was working hard. She was convinced that they were complex, even wise.

Ursula took me farther. She had returned to the tundra and day after day her red umbrella marked her location as she painted tirelessly. Not always was her subject before her as she worked. And one day she beckoned to me as I passed her at a distance. I strolled over.

"What do you think, Roscoe?" Ursula had asked me that a hundred times. She never specified what about, but usually it was easy enough to figure. This time it was the painting.

Here was no view of the spectacular range she faced, no meticulous, detailed drawing of the nearby tundra. Ursula's picture

abounded in blues and shadowy grays, with occasional brilliant patches of color, oranges and reds and rainbow streamers trailing and radiating from them. It was vague, impressionistic, yet as I studied it it took form and I recognized what it had to be—a vast cavern, illuminated from glowing sources suspended high, with great dim arches that seemed to lead on into other caverns—an impression of immensity that only a great artist could give.

Nothing was actually recognizable—or so I thought until I came close again and studied the canvas carefully. Tiny figures were on the cavern floors, hints of the same figures on irregularities of the cavern walls, creatures infinitesimally small compared to the spreading, vaulting spaciousness of the cavern. Raccoons! Most were simply tiny, vaguely familiar smudges, but a few were painted in exquisite detail.

Once again I was impressed by the eerie sixth sense that made Ursula unique. She hadn't painted the range—somehow she had looked into that mighty uplift. And what she had painted made no sense, geologically. But at the same time, it fitted.

"The surface rocks of these mountains are granitic, Ursula," I said. "Rhyolites and basalts lie under them. No sediments. There couldn't be a cavern system under there."

Ursula shrugged.

"Feel it," she said. "Got to be. Don't know why."

"It would explain a lot," I admitted. "The hollow pinnacle of Olympus. No coons above ground. I know they're subterranean. I've found burrows. But how would they live? What would they eat? And don't tell me those little varmints send the cloud signals from the big peak."

Ursula's strange eyes gleamed.

"Not telling you anything. Don't know." She never looked more like a witch. "Your job," she said.

I shrugged in my turn.

"Well," I said, "it beats just hanging around the house."

MATTERS were finally beginning to move, though. I formed hypotheses, modified them, discarded them. Jim Peters' trappers had discovered the burrows capped with rocks strangely like the native granite and yet so light they could be tipped over with a finger. As I expected, they set traps everywhere. Much good it did them. They caught nothing. The coons knew that we were on to them.

Then, overnight, two things happened. Lindy went out for her morning signaling session with the three little coons and found the cages empty, the doors unlatched and swinging. And Pegleg disappeared.

The first I had expected. There was not much doubt that the coons had been staying around for what they could learn. Jim Peters had admitted as much, but he hadn't believed they could handle his magnetic locks. He had thought they had outsmarted themselves by letting themselves be caged. He had been complacent—now he was both amused and annoyed when he found how neatly he had been gulled.

"I'm slipping, Roscoe," he told me. "Can't analyze a situation like I used to. Getting old." I'd have guessed Jim at about thirty-five. We don't wave our ages about. In space they're pretty meaningless anyhow. "Why—" he scratched his unkempt, sandy hair—"it used to take an expert to fool me. Now look."

I consoled him. "They're experts. A neat little variant of the Trojan Horse gambit—they took advantage of the fact that we probably wouldn't believe their full capabilities. They were so right that now we've got to reassess the whole situation. How capable are they? What kinds of information were they able to acquire just sitting in those cages and watching?"

"And what will they be able to do with it now they've got it? They may not be taking kindly to unannounced visitors. There's no doubt that we've upset the pattern of their living simply by being here. Though I suppose that always happens."

"It hinges on the gods," I decided. "The ruling intelligence, the guiding spirit of this part of the planet, is centered on the big peak, on old Olympus up there. Those little varmints may simply be handy adjuncts to the establishment. On the other hand, they may run the place."

"There are plenty of them," Jim said. "I suppose you know about the burrows."

"There's more to it than that," I said and told him about Ursula's picture.

"Things are picking up," the zoologist said happily. "If there is a cavern system we'll find it. Always something new."

"I can see you now," I said, "working your way into a nether world through a twisting coon burrow one foot in diameter. It'll be the high spot of your career."

"Low spot," Jim corrected. "I'll do what I have to do."

And that at least was a serious statement.

Pegleg wasn't missed until evening and even then we knew little concern. His work habits are unconventional. He usually goes alone; he drives that jeep into places no sane, practical-minded field man would even consider driving. He can change from wheels to tracks at need and the timonium pill he uses for power is good for a half-million miles. His forcefield

unit can sheathe the vehicle in a shield that will foil any primitive, raw power. So when he turned up missing we didn't worry. It had happened before.

Still, a day and a half without communication was a long time even for Pegleg. When we reached that stage Johnny Rasmussen set in motion what we called the Misplaced Personnel pattern. Every scoutboat that went out was on search alert, watching for the jeep and with radio channels open for every wavelength possible to the jeep communicator. Stony Price winnowed the high frequencies for unusual sound. Every field unit was notified.

Rasmussen quizzed me. He thought that I would know what Pegleg had had in mind if anybody would. As it happened, I didn't. I hadn't even seen him go out. But I remembered something.

The previous evening, almost at dusk, there had been unusual activity of the clouds on Mount Olympus. They had grown black like thunderheads, swirling sullenly as if in anger. The clouds were changing all the time, but this was different. Johnny Rasmussen agreed.

"It could be the key," he said. "Up to now it would have been interesting to find out about the gods. Now I think we must."

You know how I felt. Pegleg was my oldest friend, my field companion on dozens of worlds. From me he needed a special kind of help. There would be searchers in plenty, but I knew best how he thought, what motivated him, what made him tick. My job was to think—in addition to all those pretty rocks, what else had he had in mind?

I reasoned that he had offended the gods. He had invaded the shrouded peak of the sacred mountain, had violated their holy of holies. So they had waited for him and when opportunity finally allowed, they had taken him. So I built my thinking—a nice, reasonable, logical sequence. I was wrong.

V

FOR a day our search patterns blanketed the range—but it was a vast land to be lost in. The way Pegleg drove he could have dropped that jeep into any one of thousands of crevasses in hundreds of glaciers that flowed down the shoulders of peak after peak. Any rubble slide in any canyon in all that seamed network could have covered him up forever. We knew that, but we didn't falter. We searched on.

The clouds on Mount Olympus were tranquil for that day, but then they changed. The next sunrise found them billowing, crowding into strangely shaped masses, shooting out colored puffs in complicated patterns. And the coons began to appear.

Until then we had caught only fleeting glimpses. Suddenly they were everywhere. A coon sat jauntily atop every rock. They darted here and there in the open spaces, sometimes even pausing to feed. I had speculated about that and watched the procedure with interest. I had been pretty sure that they ate a variety of things. Jim Peters had fed his captives a mixture of local organics and they had eaten most of it. Here, though, each feeding pattern was identical. A pink, lilylike plant a foot or so high sheeted wide stretches of tundra. Often it was the most abundant plant in view. The coons harvested it with a stylized procedure that never varied—and it was soon evident why it was so abundant.

The coons fed on the bulk from which the lily grew. They dug it out with practiced twists of their little black hands, nipped off the stem with glistening white teeth, then removed a purple berry from the top of the stalk where the flower had been. This fruit they planted in the hole they had dug. They covered it carefully. Then, and only then, they ate the bulb with relish.

As you can imagine, I was torn. One of the mysteries of life on Olympus Two was unfolding before my eyes—but one of the *Stardust's* veteran researchers was lost, swallowed up in the impressive environment of these strange little beings. What should I do? I was high on my favorite slope and the coons swarmed around me, avoiding my boulder seat but otherwise ignoring me. I felt guilty, but I watched and made notes. I knew it was what Pegleg would have done—what, perhaps, he was doing at that moment. For the coons were out as far as I could see the tundra. Ursula's painting had prepared me a little, but the numbers were incredible.

My belt communicator rasped and sputtered.

"Dr. Kissinger." It was Stony Price. "Dr. Rasmussen calling Dr. Kissinger. Come in, Roscoe."

I thumbed my transmission button. "Roscoe here, Stony."

"Thank you, Mr. Price." Johnny Rasmussen's calm, genteel voice. "We've got news of Pegleg, Roscoe. George Wildcat trailed the jeep by jumper and he found—but let him tell you. Could you patch him in, Mr. Price?"

More rattling and rasping. Then, "Wildcat here, Dr. Kissinger." The soft voice was as unemotional as the chief's had been.

"Tell, Wildcat," I urged.

"An interesting trail, Dr. Kissinger," Wildcat said gently. "I am about a hundred and eighty miles southwest of the *Stardust*—in a deep box canyon between the fourth and fifth peaks south of Mount Olympus. Dr. Williams came here. I now have great admiration for that jeep. You would not believe the route he took."

"I'd believe it," I said. "Where's Pegleg now?"

Wildcat hesitated.

"There is a large cavern opening in the end of the canyon. Apparently he drove in. I tried my jumper communicator at the cavern mouth, but got no response from the jeep. Well protected search teams seem indicated."

"How can we get there?"

"A scoutboat seems best. At least you can reconnoiter from the air and then bring in jumper teams if you think it wise. I can give you coordinates and stand by to beam you in."

"Right. How about the coon population there?"

"They are everywhere. They are coming out of the cavern in droves. But they don't seem interested in me. They ignore me.

"All same here. This is a very big deal, probably not related to Pegleg at all."

"It is related to the cloud signals on Mount Olympus," Wildcat stated. "Notice that they're changing as we talk." He paused a minute. "Have you eagles?"

I had noticed them gathering, but they were soaring high. Now I realized that they were beginning to plane lower—and that there were thousands of them.

"We've got eagles," I said, "and they're coming down."

IN A matter of minutes the great birds were swooping all around me. The swish and whistle of the wide-pinioned wings must have made a roar in my microphone—I could also hear them in my speaker. One hundred and eighty miles away the same thing was evidently going on. And at the end of each dive was a coon.

Actually the eagles' hunting wasn't that easy. The coons leaped, dodged, swayed out of the way of the reaching talons with a facility, a cool competence that indicated practice. They had expected this and the birds often missed. But many a bird soared up again with a limp furry form clutched in its long claws. The slow, the dull, the unskilled, the unlucky—these were being pruned out fast.

My subconscious was automatically recording and interpreting all this, while my conscious mind was rejecting it. A deliberately planned survival ritual, executed by the numbers on orders broadcast by cloud patterns on a giant mountain peak—it seemed impossible. But somehow I knew it was so. The tundra was honeycombed with burrows capped by rocks that the coons could move with ease. Safety was only a few leaps away. But not one attempted to leave the action. They stayed, trusting to the speed and agility of their own muscles, pitting their alertness and timing against the fearsome swoops of the huge birds.

As a precaution I stepped into my jumper frame and activated the

forcefield. But it wasn't needed. The birds avoided me. The coons used me, dodging around me as though I were a rock. And after a few minutes the rain of swooping, diving eagles thinned, until only an occasional one threatened the still teeming numbers of coons. These last birds, I suspected were themselves young and inexperienced, still honing their food-getting skills. The whole mighty spectacle, as I viewed it, was one of grim practicality. But I had never seen anything like it. As Pegleg was wont to say, most of the experiences we have seem to be firsts.

At the thought of Pegleg I again remembered my purring communications speaker. Our three-way patch was still open, but for minutes we had been speechless.

"Still there, Wildcat?"

"Still here, Dr. Kissinger. I'm sure we've seen the same thing. May I come to hear you discuss it at the next convened report? I have some questions."

I grinned a little wryly.

"So have I, George. This is a situation where there are no experts. Give me your coordinates. I'll be over you in half an hour. Will you order me a scoutboat, Johnny?"

"It's done," the chief said. "Waiting for you."

It would take more than a swarming of coons and an invasion of eagles to disconcert Johnny Rasmussen.

I WAS pleased with my scoutboat pilot and more than pleased with my crew. Young Pete Watts grinned at me from behind his instrument panels as I came aboard. He knows how I work. The second researcher's seat was also rather well filled by Lindy. She was dressed for the field, equipped with zoom binoculars, magnaflash and laser gun swinging from her belt.

"I'm your best bet," she informed me. "The coons are involved in this and I can communicate with them. You're lucky to have me."

"You're always my best bet," I said. "Take her out, Pete. Lock on Wildcat's beam and follow the bouncing ball."

"Roger, Dr. Kissinger."

Pete was a researcher's dream pilot. In the field he never asked why.

The scoutboat spiraled, picked up the tracker's weak signal and flashed toward it. In moments great cliffs loomed high. Skillfully Pete wove the ship among them, cutting down speed for better viewing. We were in a long canyon, maybe no more than a mile across, a rugged gash in the immensity of the range. Its floor was broken, scarred, boulder-strewn. I couldn't imagine trying to tool a vehicle over that rugged terrain—but, knowing Pegleg, I could easily picture him doing it, switching from tracks to wheels to tracks

again as the situation changed. What he had been looking for was anybody's guess. But he had stumbled on something. Pegleg did nothing at random.

"Cut it down, Pete," I directed. "Slow cruise. We may as well glean all we can."

The scoutboat drifted, loafing along a few hundred feet above the rocky bottom of the canyon. Wildcat's signal came ever stronger.

"Look, Roscoe—the eagles." Lindy's binoculars swept the seamed and shattered canyon walls. Pinnacles jutted everywhere and atop practically every one a great bird sat and tore at the furry body beneath its talons. It was dinnertime in eagle land. Only a few still soared and searched, but to no avail now. The coons were gone.

I punched a communicator button and cut into Wildcat's signal.

"Can you hear me, Wildcat? We're coming in. What happened to the coons?"

"Got you, Dr. Kissinger. The clouds on the peak changed color and the coons vanished. Just popped out of sight. The party's over."

"Until next time," I agreed. "Watch for us."

The canyon ended ahead. A vast dark wall, thousands of feet high, lay across it, boxing it in. Sunlight flickered on the immense stretches of rock, but the impression was one of gloom, of coldness, of shadow. And we could see the huge opening, high as a four-story building, long before we picked out the tiny form of the tracker in the jumble of rocks below. Pete cut speed until the scoutboat barely had headway.

I suppose my subconscious had decided, long before I consciously admitted what I intended to do. To crystallize and bring the decision to the surface required the sight of the great arching entryway. I remembered Ursula's painting. The caverns were in chains, indescribably large. Unless they held energies I could not now envision a scoutboat should be able to cruise them.

My pilot knew what came next. He swung our little ship low over where Wildcat sat, then drifted in a tight circle at slowest speed. I activated the auditory cone.

"This may be news to my crew, George, but we're going to take the scoutboat into that hole. Can you think of any reason we shouldn't?"

"Just ordinary common sense, Dr. Kissinger. I'd hate to do it. There are probably controlled energies in there and there's no way to assess them. I went in a few hundred feet and lost all communication. They let me keep my magnaflash."

"They?"

"The coons. That's their country in there. And they're sharp. I wouldn't be surprised if they could neutralize your motive power."

George Wildcat's ancestry was

Mandan Sioux. He was Jim Peters' ace tracker. Give him a wilderness and a dim spoor and he was a happy young man. The planet didn't matter. And he could read from any situation far more than he could see.

"Any installations? Any artifacts? Anything they may have made?" I figured he must have something tangible on which to base so positive an attitude.

"Negative. Like Miss Potts says, I just felt it. I came out because I thought my first duty was to report. Since then I've been under orders."

"No criticism, George. You did exactly right. Notify the *Stardust* and keep your position to relay us if we can't communicate directly with the ship. I'm going to bet that their energies can't solve our forcefield."

I could hear wildcat's faint sigh.

"I thought you would," he said.

MY PILOT'S face was serious, but also quizzical. He had taken me on some strange rides. He could make a scoutboat do anything it was built to do and put it through paces the designers had never imagined. This trip, I supposed, would be in that last category.

"Take her in, Pete. Activate bumper rays outside the forcefield—and go slowly. We want to see the sights."

A scoutboat is about forty feet long, eight feet wide. In space it looks like a featureless metallic silver, pointed at both ends. Its timonium drive can flash it through planetary atmospheres at speeds great enough to make it glow, or it can drift with scarcely perceptible headway. But it cannot hover and it cannot take off from any location except its slip in the *Stardust*. Hence it cannot land.

These were not limitations. They were advantages in every situation in which scoutboats had ever been used. But it was unlikely that anyone had ever used one underground.

We slipped through the huge opening. The light of the sun faded and there were no sights to see. Stygian blackness swallowed us. Pete activated dim lights. The scoutboat floated slowly forward. Dark craggy walls showed ahead, but athwart our direction the blackness was unbroken.

"Up the range, Pete. Toward Mount Olympus. I'm betting that the chain of caverns is continuous and somewhere ahead old Zeus is waiting for us."

The scoutboat swerved, then rocked gently as the bumper rays fended it from the wall. But it never lost headway. Pete eased it onward steadily, its radar keeping it positioned halfway between the dimly revealed floor of the cavern and the vaulting ceiling above. We seemed suspended in black nothingness, going nowhere.

"Any reason for not using mag-

naflash, Dr. Kissinger? We may be missing some of those sights you wanted to see. Radar wall patterns are pretty irregular."

"We'll take a quick look," I decided, "then switch 'em off again. Don't want to overawe them, you know. Although I've got an idea they could light up this whole area if they wanted."

Actually, it wasn't my idea. It was memory. I was recalling Ursula's mystic, murky picture, with the flaring yellow and orange spots high in the vaulted upper reaches of the barely recognizable chain of caverns. Well, here were the caverns. Where was the rest?

The wide cone of pure white light, brighter than day, lanced ahead of us. The scoutboat cruised slowly. We were moving into a huge vaulted amphitheater perhaps a mile wide, a dozen miles long. At its farther end there was a great tunnel-like exit, many times larger than the opening through which we entered the system.

The sheer scale of the caverns changed my mind about the use of light.

"Keep the big beam on, Pete," I directed. "Better activate analytical systems, too. Air composition, air currents, temperature fluctuations—the works. This a world within a world. A nation, a race of beings lives here. Let's know all we can about it. Because sooner or later we're going to be asked to show our ticket stubs."

"Piloting a scoutboat through the inside of a mountain range ought to take about all of a man's attention," Lindy said. "I'll do the analyses, Dr. Kissinger. I'm rather used to that sort of thing."

"Thank you, Dr. Peterson," I said gravely. "That will free me to watch."

"And what would you be watching for—specifically?"

"A small, anachronistic, Earth-type vehicle, my sweet." Suddenly I was sober. "A jeep, I believe it's called."

Just for a moment Lindy's sympathetic grin flashed. Then she was in the technicians seat forward, playing the complicated analytical console with practiced fingers and reading half a dozen stories from the flickering light banks. The scoutboat drove on—and I watched.

SLOWLY the unreal terrain beneath us gained character. What was at first a blurred jumble began to sort itself out. That was living space down there and gradually the details appeared.

A key factor to everything we could see was evidently the light source that had been turned out. For this was not just a rocky world, though broken masses and piles of stony rubble predominated. My probing spotlight revealed these as multicolored, with such green, and the zoom binoculars showed lichen-like growth, lush and crisp, punctuated by clinging clusters of mush-

roomlike fungi in orange and scarlet and a whole range of blues. The light winked on small streams.

"Of course," I said aloud for the record. "The food base. The producers. They use the upper world, the planet's surface, but they don't depend on it. The food chains start here, powered at second hand by artificial light that can be controlled."

The strangeness of our situation gradually faded as the familiar, basic patterns of the ecosystem began to emerge. They sometimes took odd forms, alien sequences, but in the last analysis they showed the same framing. I began to feel comfortable again. This was my lifelong concern. Only the details were different.

"A plant cover, varied," I announced. "What's the weather out there like, Dr. Peterson?"

"Temperate," Lindy intoned. "Rather high humidity, but good air circulation. Should be fresh and invigorating. Temperature seventy-one degrees Fahrenheit. And no sunshine at all."

"Are you sure?"

For as she spoke the vast cavern suddenly was flooded with yellow light. The details I had been observing piecemeal were spread out below, a strange, sunlit, enclosed landscape. And the very sun itself seemed to hang high in the vaulted upper reaches of this buried world."

"I don't know when I've seen a quicker sunrise," Lindy murmured. She pushed buttons, coaxed more data from the humming console. "No hard radiation, Roscoe. Light almost the same quality as sunlight. A bit more red." She studied the light readout for a moment longer, then leaned back in her chair.

"I'm glad I came," she announced. "We are now transient visitants in the galaxy's greatest controlled-environment chamber. That sun is a hydrogen ball, confined, activated and paced in some ungodly fashion I'll never have sense enough to understand."

I STUDIED the rocky floor slipping along beneath us. For some minutes I had been aware that the small stone piles scattered at random among the lichen-clad slides were too uniform, too precise to be natural. The zoom binoculars confirmed this. They looked like little stone igloos. I'd have guessed their origins anyhow, but close-ups left no doubt. Many had openings and bright-eyed little coons peered from them. I pointed them out.

"Farm houses," I said.

"Complete with peasants," Lindy agreed. "They're predictable. But those little creatures aren't probing our forcefield. They can't turn the sun off and on."

"I think I agree," I said. "Still, something can—and I'd be a mite easier in my mind if I knew what."

"Let's find out," my wife said. "You know and I know that the

answer is up ahead. That's where the jeep is—and Pegleg."

"The gods?"

"The gods. And I still would like to have that little chat with Aphrodite."

"You shall, my pet," I said. "By the nine gods I swear it. Take her along, Pete. We're betting that the caverns are continuous all the way to Mount Olympus and that the scoutboat can take us through. Be careful of intersections and U-turns, otherwise use your own judgment."

The pilot gave me a swift look and settled himself in his chair.

"Roger, Dr. Kissinger," he said happily. "I'll try to get you there in time for dinner. We wouldn't want the nectar and ambrosia to get cold."

I should have known better. But the next instant it was too late. The cavern walls were blurring, the scoutboat tilting and weaving and darting, and the cavern suns were flashing past like streetlamps along a village street. I would have lost face to have ordered a cut in speed—but I'll never forget that ride.

I knew that the computer-pilot was plotting the course, altering it each microsecond as the radar fed in data. No human reaction time could possibly have been fast enough. But it was Pete who determined the speed and even in space he loved to move. What it was like in that linked netherworld of tunnels and caverns I leave you to imagine. I do remember wondering fleetingly how I'd look with my hair all gray.

Still, we got through. The scoutboat was slowing almost before my apprehensions were sorted out and justified.

"Complications up ahead, Dr. Kissinger," Pete reported. "Have to cut down a little. Sorry."

I ignored Lindy's slightly strained grin.

"I forgive you, Pete," I said. "It may even be more dignified to approach heaven slowly." I looked forward into the space we were just entering. "I see what you mean by complications."

VI

WE HAD passed through many caverns, some of them extensive. Most of them had doubtless had installations of varying complexity, but of course we had not truly seen them. What lay ahead we could see and it was impressive.

This enclosure was not large compared to some we had traversed. It was perhaps three or four miles long, and half as wide. Two orange suns glowed a half-mile up. The effect was like a summer noon on Earth.

Here was no hint of the rural, the pastoral feel of the earlier caves. This one was structured, complex, used. Several features struck the eye. One was the forest of pylons,

slender metallic cylinders extending upward from heights of a few feet to perhaps a couple of hundred. They occurred in clusters, strung out in lines, or in random isolation here and there all the way to the distant walls. They seemed to sprout from the rocky substrate, connected to nothing and there was no clue to their purpose. But their nature was soon apparent.

"Energy pylons, Dr. Kissinger," Pete reported. "My meters are jumping. Every one of those things is hot."

"Are they focusing on us? Is the forcefield under stress?"

The pilot shook his head. We were now barely drifting and I noticed that we were swinging wide to avoid the higher cylinders.

"Negative on both counts. Everything is normal. But the potential is there. Somehow each cylinder is a transmission device. Whether any of them could cause us any grief—no way to tell. No data."

"We still do it, don't we?" Lindy looked up from her console. "The old Earth attitude. The human point of view. Why should they want to cause us grief? Maybe it's no part of their thinking at all. Perhaps we're simply objects of wonder to be explained, not destroyed."

"Every ecosystem is based on strife," I pointed out. "Every living thing in a natural system has competed successfully. Otherwise it's dead. That's an advanced setup down there. It didn't get that way without effective defences. It may shoot first and investigate afterward."

"Since it hasn't maybe it won't," Lindy said. "Incidentally, there's still no hard radiation with the light and the air is sweet and good. Even the humidity is no higher in spite of all the steam pits."

Steam lakes or steam ponds would have been more accurate. They dotted the cavern floor and condensation mists rose from them, drifting and dissipating in the air. Some had multicolored deposits built up along their edges. Water ran from them in wide, glistening sheets. Fumaroles puffed and blew. A steaming jet of water topped with a cloud plume climbed to medium pylon height for several minutes as we watched, then slowly subsided.

I swept the area with my ever-useful zooms, while Pete drifted the scoutboat slowly in random patterns back and forth. He knew me. He was waiting for orders.

"I'm beginning to understand," I said finally. "Hydrothermal energy. Plenty of it. A subterranean geyser basin. Probably been here for eons. Somehow they've learned to convert it, to harness it. They've built a culture around it. All the rest is detail."

"So we're back to *they*," Lindy said. "Who are *they*?"

I grinned at her.

"The gods," I said. "The gods of Mount Olympus. I would suspect that we're under their mountain. Confirm, Pete?"

"Confirm, Dr. Kissinger," the pilot said. "Or in the neighborhood, at least. We've come the right distance in the right direction. I'd say this is it."

The complex of installations below also seemed to confirm it. Not that it looked like any industrial arrangement we had ever envisioned or experienced. But there were piled clusters of rock structures built against the cavern wall in one location, a random-appearing jumble that stretched along the wall for several hundred yards. And it swarmed with coons.

"Drop us in, Pete," I directed. "Slowly. Let them see us at close range. Then it'll be their move."

"I think it's already ours." Lindy's glasses were sweeping the strange artifacts. "Look, Roscoe. Halfway along the building complex—beside the tallest pylon."

It was Pegleg's jeep.

THE scoutboat nosed down gently. It must have been a marvel to the thronging, bright-eyed little creatures that darted in and out of the myraid openings of the building complex. There were literally acres of them. They made a seething, shifting pattern as we swept slowly over them at a height of forty feet or so.

"No sign of Pegleg?" I kept the anger out of my voice, but Lindy sensed it.

"Take it easy, Roscoe," she soothed me. "He's probably guest of honor at that dinner we're late for. I can't feel hostility. Just interest and curiosity. They'll be delighted to set some plates for us."

"They'll have their chance," I said shortly. "I'm going down. Swing out the ladder, Pete, and make a run at twenty feet. I'll drop off beside the jeep."

The scoutboat turned in a tight circle and began its glide. The speed slowed almost to the pace of a walking man. The emergency hatch next to my seat slid back, the pliable ladder dropped through and I climbed down to swing free beneath the ship. It was a practiced gambit. We used it often.

Coons scurried as I dropped from the ladder. I strode over and stood with my back against the jeep, hand on my laser, my eyes trying to take in the whole improbable situation.

The coons surrounded me, row on row and rank on rank, bright eyes rolling, black hands flying, tails twitching. I could hear the shuffle of thousands of little feet, but otherwise they made no sounds at all. The gurgle of flowing water, the hiss and pop of the boiling springs, the splash of geysers—these were the noises of this hidden world.

I thumbed my communicator switch.

"Calling Dr. Williams. Kis-

singer calling Dr. Williams. Speak up, Pegleg."

I didn't expect an answer. But I got one. Promptly, too.

My open receiver rasped and cleared its throat. Pegleg's voice came, understandable enough, but rather muffled and faint.

"Williams here. Where are you, Roscoe?"

He didn't sound distressed and suddenly I felt good again. I hadn't realized how the tension had been building.

"A better question is—where are you? I'm in front of the biggest rockpile. Standing by the jeep. Direct me and I'll come get you."

Pegleg's chuckle rattled the receiver.

"You wouldn't get far. Heaven is a pretty complicated place. Hold tight and I'll try to come to you. I don't think they'll stop me from walking out. But they've taken my gun. So watch yours."

"Roger. Leave your communicator open."

The first ring of coons was ten feet away from me and they didn't seem disposed to come closer. But their restless fingers and twitching tails never stopped. Their motions seemed to have developed a rhythm—then I realized that they were all going through the same patterns. They were all saying the same thing and in unison. They didn't seem unfriendly, but there was certainly no way to tell.

I watched them for several minutes. The shadow of the scoutboat drifted across and for a moment all eyes were on it. Pete was staying close. If it came to that, he could lash that sea of furry bodies with savage, disintegrating energy. But what they might do in return was entirely problematical. The slender pylon behind me reached up for more than a hundred feet.

So, as Pegleg advised, I held tight. The coons continued their swinging pattern, speeding it up, giving it a jive beat. The concept seemed ridiculous, but I think they were having fun. If they had not been voiceless I'm sure they would have been chanting. It could have been, *Yah-yah,* or it could have been, *Welcome to our city.* Lindy might have known. I didn't. And after a bit it became irritating. I made the gesture remembered from the three little coons in Jim Peters' cages and briefly covered my eyes with my hands.

THAT interested them. The soundless chant stopped. The front row surged forward a couple of feet, but I waved it back and put my hand on my gun. They understood all right. They had taken Pegleg's gun. I wondered briefly how they had managed that.

The scoutboat came over again, drifting slowly, ladder trailing. Lindy swung off into the little circle.

"Apologies, Roscoe. I know you didn't call me. But I hate to sit

in the grandstand when a game is going on. After all, you don't know what they're saying."

Lindy's beautiful anytime, but never more so than when her interest is focused on a problem, especially a problem with living things. Then she glows. Any danger that might have been in this situation she simply ignored.

"I'm waiting for Pegleg," I explained. "He's back in that rockpile somewhere, apparently. But he says he can come out."

"I know. We heard. And meanwhile they're trying to tell you something and I might just be able to figure out what." She misted her green eyes at me. "You don't mind, do you Roscoe? Just you keep watch. I'll do the talking."

I shrugged with mock resignation—or maybe it wasn't entirely mock.

"Don't you always? What's a wife for?"

She was the focus of thousands of pairs of sly black eyes as she made motions, touched herself in patterns, even held a hand behind her to simulate a tail. And when she paused, the watchers erupted into a sea of motion. Everybody talked at once. It seemed a racial failing.

She made the now familiar gesture and covered her eyes. The motions subsided. Then she pointed to one coon in the first row, beckoned him forward. He understood. He took a couple of steps into the circle and sat upright, his black hands folded on his chest.

Lindy tried her signs again. She pointed at the jeep, swept an arm to indicate the complex of buildings, made a motion that even I could interpret. Where? Where was the man who drove the jeep?

They knew, all right. The spokesman didn't have to answer that one. The sea of heads swiveled toward the rock structure opposite. I suppose it was the most imposing of the complex, though they all looked pretty much alike to me. But it was by far the biggest, a multidomed jumble that reached forty or fifty feet up the cavern wall and had a frontage half a block long. The seat of a personage—or personages.

The spokesman graphically confirmed my surmise. He lay prone, his snout pressed into the dust, his hands clasped behind his head. A position of subservience, of submission. Authority lived in that rock pile.

My communicator crackled.

"I think I'm almost out, Roscoe." Pegleg's voice was clearer. "I'm not so good on these ladders. Anyhow, I have to proceed with dignity. I'm being escorted and I get the impression that it's quite an honor. Wait'll you see."

"Roger," I said. "Waiting."

The openings in the rock dwellings, were all coon-sized. A man could scarcely have thrust his head into them. But the big house, the

palace or whatever it was, boasted a portal. It was easily five feet high, three feet wide, and into the wall around the opening were set sheets of glistening mica. Pegleg emerged from this imposing aperture, bending to clear it. Pegleg is six feet tall.

He gave us a wave, then stood aside as his escort came slowly and with dignity into the light. We were a hundred feet away and I promptly swung up my binoculars. Of the several possibilities that I had considered, I suppose I had given this one the least weight. For the escort was merely another coon.

Correction. Not merely another coon. There couldn't have been another like him along that entire cavern chain, not on this whole great planet called Olympus Two.

He was coal black. He was easily three times the size of any coon I had yet seen. He walked erect on plantigrade feet, striding deliberately, his facile hands gesturing. He was abundantly, blatantly male.

They approached us slowly, Pegleg one step behind his host, a wide pathway opening as they advanced. The thousands of coons watched, but the waving, twitching conversation was stilled. Each made a single, one-handed gesture as the big coon passed, a gesture of respect.

When they stood before us, Pegleg made the introduction with a wave of his hand. "Zeus," he said.

WE STARED most impolitely, but what do you do when you're introduced to a god? Lindy adjusted first. She made the same motion the coons had made, the gesture of respect. I followed suit awkwardly. Pegleg watched us, grinning.

"You're kidding, Pegleg," I said.

"You know I'm not. These little varmints have built a culture around hydrothermal energy. They work metals, generate current, understand chemical reactions. How they do things I don't know —I've been a sort of restricted guest in the Big Man's town house over there. I've eaten lily bulbs, lichens and a molded mound of stuff, not identified but savory, out of a polished stone dish. I've drunk cool water from a fountain. I've slept on a mat as soft as down and they pinched my gun while I napped. They knew well enough what it was."

"How did you find the caverns? What clues did you have? Why didn't you let me know?"

"It's a long story," Pegleg said. "Right now we'd better be giving due deference to his nibs there. Call him Yahweh, call him Zeus, call him anything you want, but he's the big black he-coon of this whole operation and don't you forget it."

Lindy's cheeks were faintly pink.

"We noticed," she said primly.

Pegleg laughed aloud.

"You should see his lady friends," he said. He has at least a dozen. He had them all file past me and make polite motions."

But he didn't faze Lindy. Nobody does.

"Was, by any chance, Aphrodite among them?" she inquired sweetly. "I have unfinished business with her."

"You know," Pegleg said, "she just might have been. There was one— Oh, oh, what's bugging him?"

Old Zeus had turned his back on us. He made a series of motions to the nearest coon, which made the gesture of respect and darted for the portal of the celestial Palace —if that was what it was.

The shadow of the scoutboat drifted across again. Zeus watched it carefully, almost reflectively. It was easy to see that he didn't quite know how much he might risk with us. But I sensed that he would be happy if we would just go away. He said as much. He included us all in a wave of a hand, then pointed to the scoutboat.

"Here's your hat," Lindy interpreted. "Nice to have seen you. Goodbye."

"Not my hat exactly," Pegleg said. "Look."

She was even more spectacular than her lord and master and she walked with a conscious pride. She was a glistening, glossy white. When she came closer we could see that the wide eyes were pink. They blinked continually in the strong lingt. She held both hands out before her gingerly and on the pink palms lay Pegleg's laser gun.

"He sent for the gun," Pegleg conjectured. "He doesn't want us to have any reason to stick around. But it may have been her idea to bring it herself. She wanted to see you closeup."

"You're guessing," I said.

"Sure. But she watched me a lot in there. She does as she pleases. She's special. In fact, she's—"

"Aphrodite?" Lindy was gleeful.

Pegleg grinned. "Could be." He bent to take his gun from the small outstretched hands and gravely made the gesture of respect. Lindy and I imitated him. The goddess favored us with a slow, regal stare, then made a gracious motion. She turned and grasped the black hand of her big consort, cuddled against him. They walked away from us, back along the lane through the sea of their subjects, making gracious gestures as they went. They did not look back.

"Aphrodite's secret," Lindy murmured. "Is that all there is to it? Why, I've known that all along."

I put my arm around her.

"It's the worst-kept secret in the universe," I said, "and the male doesn't live who isn't glad."

I SUGGESTED it and Pegleg agreed that it was a good idea—

so we dropped magnetic grapples around the jeep, pulled it up and secured it tightly against the belly of the scoutboat. Then we cruised back along the chain of caverns, cameras recording the whole remarkable route. We watched and talked. Pegleg recounted his adventures. They were interesting, but, once explained, not too unusual. They are not pertinent here. He has put them on record in complete detail. (*ISC Annals. Vol. 89. The Log of the* Stardust. *A. D. 2123.*)

We recognized that our chances of learning much more of the technology of the coon-people were not good. The details of how old Zeus managed the mechanics of the clouds were not likely to be known. We could have tried. But International Space Council ruling was specific on the point. *No interference with the activities of an aware species.* We were restricted to what our sensors could tell us. We could only learn what. Not how. If we had been invited—but we weren't. Zeus had made that very plain.

Still, I was satisfied. Like every successful race I'd encountered, this one had solved the basic problems. They had space and they used it well. They had built predation into their life scheme, so that their numbers would not become too great and so that the cleverest and the strongest would survive. And they had authority, a godhead, and they respected and obeyed it.

The influence of their ruling deities could have extended far beyond their own species. The mysterious cloud forms of the mighty mountain certainly must have affected all living things that could see and realize their strangeness. I didn't know that there were such, but there could have been.

The scoutboat nosed out of the entrance canyon and flashed along the side of the range, homing on the mother ship. The great massif of Mount Olympus lay dead ahead, seeming even more magnificent and overpowering after our time in the caverns. And as we approached, the cloud banks spread, took on color and swirled even faster until the summit seemed wrapped in a whirling rainbow. There had never been such a display before.

"Is it a threat, a salute or a warning?" Pegleg mused. "One thing is sure—it's meant for us."

"There's no menace in it," Lindy said. "I seem to feel that it's just making a statement, just reminding us."

"Of what?" I asked.

"Of an obvious fact. I think Browning said it many years ago much better than I ever could."

"I'm shy on Browning," I said.

My wife looked upward at the majestic mountain, and smiled as she quoted softly:

God's in his Heaven,
All's right with this world . . ●

THE EMOMAN

ALAN DEAN FOSTER

Buy your emotions here. Today's special bargain—RIGHTEOUS ANGER!

THIS is the story of two people and how three of them died.

By and large, they were pretty nice people.

But it's not a very nice story.

* * *

"I've come to buy some anger," called up the too-young man. He sat himself down on a metal sawhorse and waited.

"Indeed?" replied the man working up and across from him.

"Indeed," answered the too-young man.

The gentleman working across from the too-young man and his metal sawhorse was engaged in an anomaly. He was repairing a boat. This in itself was not terribly unusual. It was a common enough activity in boatyards. But he was driving metal pinions into the boat's hull with a hand-held hammer. This, instead of using an automatic arm.

What was more, the hull of the craft appeared to be made of natural celluloid materials instead of plasticine, metalloy, or ferro-sponges. This ship was not new. Its hull was badly in need of a new coat of paint.

From the back the man did not seem especially arresting. This impression changed when he paused, straightened and turned on his ladder to face the other.

He stood slightly over average height but seemed taller. Leonine, well built, lithe. The lines in his face seemed put there by a drunken cartographer. Each led to some strange valley, forbidden city or unfathomable abyss of the soul.

For all of that he was not ancient. The streaks of black in his otherwise iron-gray hair were plentiful and not the product of cosmetics. In back the hair was gathered into a single pigtail by an odd arrangement of leather bindings. A single solid-gold ring pierced his left ear. He had thick gray eyebrows that had been intended for a much larger man. They shaded equally gray eyes. His nose was long and slightly hooked. His mouth and lips were thin and clenched tightly. His whole expression was full of star space and vinegar.

"What makes you think I could sell you anger, feller me lad?"

"You are the man they call Sawbill," said the too-young man. It was not a question.

"I'm the man some call Sawbill. I'm often called other things and many of them are better. Some are worse. Sawbill will do."

Facing Sawbill, the too-young man was not all that young. The gulf between them, though, was one that some people might have called age.

HIS metallic red jumpsuit flashed in the morning sun. "Then you're the one I want, all right. I am not without resources. Or brains. I've checked on you thoroughly. Oh, very carefully, very quietly. You needn't worry at all."

"I wasn't. But go on." Sawbill was rummaging through a small keg of metal pinions, variously shaped and sized.

"You weren't easy to locate—I'll give you that. But I knew how to find you. It's all a matter of asking the right question in the right places. And if you have money and know a few people in expedient locations—on the Port immigration board, for example—you can find out just about anything. I want to make a purchase, Sawbill."

The boat had a low-lying central cabin. A bird thing perched on the edge of it. The bird's rainbow-hued crest bobbed up and down like a metronome. Its tail was of bright golden feathers and the rest of it was dull, crushed, velvety gold. The thing fluttered down to land on Sawbill's right shoulder. Dipping and bobbing, it surveyed the new arrival. The rainbow crest feathers flashed in avian Morse.

The too-young man stared with interest at the bird-thing. He was no ornithologist, not even an amateur. But he was well read. Enough to know that this bird was not native to Thalia Major. (It might have come from Thalia Minor, but he doubted it because. . .)

"Well, feller me lad, who wants to buy anger—what's your moniker?"

"Moniker?"

"Handle. Wing. Name. Pseudo-corporeal psychic verbal inculcation. What have you been conditioned to call yourself?"

"Jasper Jordan. And it's my real name, not an alias. See, I have no desire to hide things from you. I want this all to be very open. That's a fascinating pet you have."

Sawbill carefully aligned a nail, drove it home with two solid, short raps from the hammer. He spoke without pausing in his work or looking back.

"It's a pim-bird from Tehuantepec. The things are sacred to the Indians who inhabit the planet's two continents. They are called pim-birds for convenience. Of the natives—not of the birds, who have nothing to say in the matter. Their real names are much longer and even incorporate a short snatch of song. You wouldn't understand it, because the natives themselves don't. It's a very old song. A rough terranglo translation begins *Tears*

of the sun. . . and flows from there. This particular pim-bird supposedly contains the soul of the great emperor Lethan-atuan, who —depending on which legend you prefer to believe—at one time ruled with the most beautiful Queen Quetzal-ma half this galaxy or a cluster of three small islands off the coast of the continent Col. Just now it happens to be hungry. It is said by the Indians that if the souls of the emperor and his queen are ever reunited, they will once again rule the galaxy. Which is one reason the natives permitted me to take him off-planet. They rather like their present system of rule and frown on the idea of long-dead emperors returning."

HE TURNED and pointed the hammer at Jordan. "So you want to buy anger, hmm? What kind of anger?"

"There are different kinds?"

Sawbill picked up another couple of nails. "Different kinds? There are as many different kinds as there are foolish young men in the universe. There's uncertain anger, which is dark pits filled with thorns. There's jealous anger, which is honey and syrup all blended together and spoiled. There's the anger of unhappiness, which is the texture of polished chalcedony. There's the anger of helplessness, which is like sour milk to a babe. There's the anger of ignorance, which is the space between the stars. And the anger of creative genius, which is the grandest anger of them all and more than the sum of any two others. But I can't sell it to you because I'm always well out of it."

"That's not the kind I want," said Jasper Jordan. "I have money and I'm not offensive to look upon. I need something to boost me down the road a bit. To activate the navigational gyro in my spirit. To move me."

"Then you don't need anger; you need a psychiatrist," Sawbill replied evenly.

"I don't want to change the way I feel. I want to indulge in it, to glory in it. I didn't come for what I need. I came for what I want. What I want is anger. Good, strong, biting, cleansing, wave-breaking, glass-shattering anger. The mate of hate. Seven-league-boot anger. Do you understand?" He was not quite pleading.

"Why, surely," said Sawbill, driving home another nail. "That's called righteous anger and I always keep plenty of that in stock. Come aboard."

Jasper Jordan followed Sawbill up a small boarding ladder and into the bowels of the old sloop.

The pim-bird, which might have been an emperor at one time—and then again, might not—looked down at them and whistled: *Ee-kwoo, ee-kwoo, ee-kwo-hoo. . .*

JASPER JORDAN seated himself in an undisciplined old chair in the spacious central cabin.

"You wait there," Sawbill said softly, "while I get what you want." He disappeared forward.

Jordan looked around. The decor was esoteric—indeed, eccentric. Most of the furnishings were made from natural woods. Some were dark-grained and highly polished, others as brown as raw bacon. For sheer color chromoplate had them beat hollow. For tactile beauty it was no contest.

The chair in which he sat was worlds removed from the late-model automatic fluxator in his office, the one that molded itself to every contour of his body. But somehow this collection of springs and stuffing flattered his backside quite well.

Sawbill returned. He sat down opposite Jordan and placed seven tiny capsules on the table between them. Each was clearly numbered. Jordan leaned forward.

"As you can see, there are seven pills," began Sawbill. "They are to be taken in sequence, an hour apart. No closer than that, time-wise. A thousand credits apiece. You have your card and meter with you?"

Jordan nodded. He reached into a pocket, brought out both. After making the necessary adjustments he handed the card to Sawbill.

"What happens after I've taken them all?"

"An hour after you've taken the seventh pill you'll have thirty-six t-standard hours of what you want. That I promise you." Sawbill registered the exchange of credit on his own battered cardmeter, handed the card back to Jordan. Then he sat back in his chair and took out a pipe. He began stuffing it with tobacco.

Jordan reset his card while Sawbill spoke. "If anyone should ask, you've never seen me before and you never will again." Jordan didn't look up. "You will have the anger to enforce the drive to do what it is you desire to do. Provided you don't run into someone with a stronger reserve of the natural stuff than what I've given you. Most unlikely that there is anyone on this planet who can resist the force those seven capsules are going to put in your head.

"You're a peaceable-seeming young fellow. Those are usually the types who seek me out."

"Mine is a case of a strong

emotion seeking a stronger one," muttered Jordan. He pulled out a small quartz vial and carefully deposited the pills in it, one by one.

Sawbill leaned forward suddenly. He put a gnarled hand covered with gray fuzz on Jordan's slimmer, smoother one. He stared hard and searchingly into the other's eyes.

"You've no idea what you're getting into, feller me lad. Before you go I want to know what you intend these capsules for. I want to know why you want them. I want to know the details. I want the ramifications, the exigencies, the history you call up your desire from. I want all that before I let you go."

"Well," Jordan began uncertainly, "there is a woman—"

"Ah," said Sawbill, removing his hand and sitting back. "That will do."

THE hull of the sloop had been repaired, sanded and refinished to be as smooth as the waves it would slide over. Now it was receiving a new coat of fresh, resistant red polymer. Thalia Major had performed another couple of pirouettes on its axis. Thalia Minor had, too. But, of course, that didn't matter, because...

A tall young man arrived in the boatyard. He asked a few pointed questions and paid a few small bribes. He was very composed. Soon he was looking up at Sawbill. Sawbill was leaning over the back of the boat, painting the rudder. He used a brush, not a sprayer.

"Are you the one they call Sawbill, who sells emotions?" asked the tall young man composedly.

"Impossible," replied Sawbill sadly, pausing in his painting.

"I'm Terence Wu," said the tall young man. He was elegantly dressed in a black-and-white semi-formal suit. He wore his straight black hair in an Iroquois cut—a wide bushy brush ran down the center of his skull. He had high cheekbones, a wide grin and small black eyes. Judging by the ring on his left hand, a ring that had been cut from a single large sapphire and caught the light of the sun like a siren, he also had a great deal of money.

"I want to buy some anger," said the tall young man.

"What kind of anger?" Sawbill asked, returning to his painting. He caught a spot lower down that he had missed earlier.

"The kind of anger that lets you slash and cut without hesitation," said Terence Wu tightly. "The kind that makes other men look to their feet and cats sweat." The rich young man's hands were tightly

clenched, nails impressing palms. He was most earnest. "The kind that the padres do not approve of. That kind of anger."

Sawbill indicated the ladder. "Then come aboard, feller me lad, come aboard."

Wu relaxed slightly and started for the ladder. "Then you have that kind of anger?" he asked.

"Why, surely," replied Sawbill, dipping the brush in a can of clear polymer debonder. "That's the anger of revenge and I always keep plenty of that in stock."

He took another look at the way the photon magnet on the man's finger disorganized the light of the fading sun. "It will cost you three times seven thousand credits, feller me lad."

"That's perfectly agreeable," said Wu evenly, stepping onto the deck.

Sawbill indicated the way down. "May I inquire why you should wish such anger?"

"Well," began Wu, hesitantly, "there's a woman—"

"Ah!" said Sawbill understandingly.

"—and she's been taken from me. I want her back."

"Of course," murmured Sawbill as he followed the young man down.

Forward, the pim-bird observed the ocean devouring the sun-ball and said, *Ee-kwoo, ee-kwoo, ee-kwoo-hoo. . .*

HE WAS stacking the last strands of new dylon rigging when a voice from below said, "Hello."

Sawbill looked over the railing. The too-young man stood below. Jordan's face was pale, haggard, worn. His suit, blue this time, was badly rumpled, as was his manner.

"Hello on board," he said rather shakily, evidently not seeing Sawbill.

"Evening," said Sawbill.

"Look—I know I promised not to see you again, but I've got to talk to you."

"Do you?" asked Sawbill, turning back to his waxing. He dipped a hand in the pot of wax and continued running the new line through his fingers. "But I don't have to talk to you."

"Dammit to hell!" came the whining yelp from the ground. "You got me into this. You've got to help me. Please." The voice paused. "You've got to sell me another dose!"

"I don't have to sell you anything," Sawbill replied quietly. He stopped at a section of line that seemed a little frayed, gave it an extra coat of wax.

"I can make trouble for you—"

"So can a bumblebee—" Sawbill

sighed—"if his coordinates in relation to the center of the universe do not coincide with mine. But come on board and I'll listen to you."

Jordan climbed on board. He was panting heavily. His visage was not a comforting thing to look upon. His face was dirty. He wiped absently at a particularly greasy spot under one eye. The gesture had the effect of redistributing the muck evenly across his cheek. He slumped into the pilot's seat behind the many-spoked wheel and groaned.

"I've had other things on my mind," he said.

"Were you satisfied with what you paid for?" Sawbill asked.

For a moment Jordan seemed to brighten. A combination of feelings, none of them holy, came into his eyes.

"Yes. It was everything you promised. But afterward—why couldn't you have given me a stronger dose, one for longer than thirty-six hours?"

"I gave you the maximum for a person of your type."

"How do you presume to know what 'type' I am?" Jordan asked belligerently.

Sawbill looked up from his waxing. "If I'd given you a stronger dose or told you to take the seven at slightly shorter intervals you would have been harmed—you might even have died."

"I don't believe you."

Sawbill shrugged and went on with his waxing.

After several minutes Jordan pleaded, "What can I do?"

"Don't beg, don't cry and don't whine. I could sell you another kind of emotion that would cure those tendencies, too. But you would resist. So tell me what happened. Why do you find it necessary to acquire more anger than is good for a man at one time?"

"There's this girl—" began Jasper Jordan.

"That's the substance, the body, the core, the hub of the thing," said Sawbill. "Now supply me the tinsel, the sprinkles on top of the sweetcakes, the things that metamorphose your need into leeches."

"She's the most beautiful girl on Thalia Major."

"Not in the universe?"

"Don't mock me. I don't know the universe. I only know Thalia Major. And Minor, of course, but that doesn't matter. We were in love—"

"How long have you known her?"

"Three weeks," Jordan said defiantly. When Sawbill did not comment he continued. "Everything was fine. We were going to be married."

"Did she finally agree to marry you?"

"It went without saying. As I said—everything was fine until several days ago. Then I found out she was seeing another—man, I suppose I must call him. She didn't deny it. She admitted she was meeting this putrid, low. . . I couldn't understand why. But I couldn't convince her to break it off. He had hypnotized her. I'm a very mild, you might even say a tame, individual. I didn't have the force of personality to confront him. We're all very civilized here on Thalia Major."

"Yes," said Sawbill encouragingly.

"I just wanted to warn him off, to tell him to leave us alone. Not to confuse her any more. So I came to see you. Everyone knows about you Emomen—even if you are hard to find."

"We like it that way."

"Well, the beginning went just as I had hoped—exactly as I had imagined it would. Better, even. I was a terror—although I don't remember the details very well, I'm afraid. I completely overpowered him spiritually and mentally. He couldn't take it. He vowed never to see her again. And he meant it. I could tell. I was irresistible. Then—yesterday—he confronted me in my office. We had a terrible row. He was a madman! I had never seen a human being behave so. I was reduced to —jelly. He was an elemental force. I tried to stand up to him, but I couldn't. I found myself babbling apologies for ever having looked at Jo-ann. You can't imagine what it was like. I've never confronted anything like that before. Helpless. And he recorded the entire thing, the whole humiliating experience.

"And then, last night I tried to sneak over to see her. To try to rebuild myself in her eyes at least partially. Praying all the while, of course, that I wouldn't meet that giant, that godlike devil again. I saw them taking the lift up to her apartment—and went out and got drunk. Then it came to me to come back here. You've got to give me something stronger this time—something that will last. Something that will enable me to push him away once and for all."

Sawbill finished washing the wax from his hands. He sat back against the bulk of the cabin. He became absorbed in an inspection of the rear hatchway.

After a long while he asked bluntly, "Why should I become a participant in this? Perhaps he is the better man for her than you. Maybe matters are best left this way."

"It's his father's money that's blinded her! The family name is . . . well, no matter. But the father is one of the richest men in Barragash. I work hard—I'm well off, yes. But not in that class. I can compete with him and better him in everything except the matter of credit."

Sawbill was adamant. "I will sell you nothing stronger. I gave you your maximum dosage. And that's all you can have."

The too-young man was desperate. "Then at least sell me the same, the same seven again. You owe me that."

Sawbill grunted and wiped his hands on his pants. "It will cost you double this time."

"Yes, yes, anything—" He was like an eager puppy. "I promise—if this doesn't do it I will give her up to him. I'll move to another city. Perhaps to another planet. I might even go to Thalia Minor. Who knows? But in any case I will not trouble you again."

On a high mast the pim-bird was sobbing for the moon.

SAILS furled, the little sloop sat on the water. Sawbill had the mainsail ready and was preparing the spinnaker when the peaceforcers came for him.

The man on the dock was short and plump. He had a benignly optimistic face and scraggly brown hair that was fighting a rear-guard action.

A green aircar waited at the far end of the dock. It had the oak tree symbol of the peaceforcer emblazoned on its side. Two uniformed men stood against it, chatting.

"Pretty little ship," said the man on the dock.

"Yes, it is," said Sawbill. "Used not to be. Is now." He was wrestling with the sail locker. The pim-bird fidgeted and bobbed on his shoulder. It moved to the top of his head, then dropped down to the shoulder again, eyeing the short man.

"I'd like you to come with me for a bit, Sawbill. I'm Inspector Herrera."

"Nice for you, I guess."

"Usually it is, but not today."

"I was just about to go out for a month or so. I'm trying to get away from people and civilization for a while. A vacation—you understand?"

Herrera nodded. "I do. Really, I do." He seemed honestly sympathetic. "But I'd still like you to come with me."

"If I decline?" Sawbill asked, straightening. "No doubt those gentlemen by your car will hurry down here with things short, me-

tallic and unesthetic. To persuade me?"

Herrera sighed. "No, Sawbill, they will not. You've probably heard before that we are very civilized, here on Thalia Major. One of those men is a driver—and all he is going to do is drive. The other is a secretary."

"And all he will do is sec?"

"Please don't make light of this. It's difficult enough for me as it is. I cannot compel you."

"Meaning I'm not under arrest, right?"

"As you are well aware I have no grounds for an arrest. Wish I did. But I suspect you will come with me—out of curiosity if for no other reason. I will not delay you long—a moment or two out of your vacation is all I need."

Sawbill hesitated. Then he tied down the sails and climbed down to the dock. He and Herrera started toward the aircar.

"Where are you going to go, Sawbill?"

"The Marragas Islands, then south to the Anacapa atolls. I'd like to put in there for a bit. I understand most of the reefs around there are still uninhabited and rarely visited. Good fishing, too."

"So I hear," said Herrera. "Most folk around here go north for their vacations. To Three and Ark and Jumbles—pleasure towns. Where all their surprises can be arranged for them. All the entertainment galactic ingenuity can provide. And build."

THERE was a lot of blood in the room, which was done in blue and gold. The red blood contrasted strangely. The electric curtains were drawn back, admitting the sun. They were for effect only, since the glass was fully polarized. The sunlight gave added obscenity to the stains.

What was left of the body of the girl was sprawled across the back of the couch, facing the open window. She had been torn apart. Her insides were strewn across half the room. Her face, Sawbill could see, probably had once been pretty, possibly even beautiful.

Terence Wu was also in the room. All over it. A bit here, a fragment there. Sawbill could make out an arm protruding from under the couch. Nothing was attached to the arm. A leg dangled from the mantel over the quaint, wood-burning fireplace.

The corpse of Jasper Jordan was in the bathroom, slumped over the rim of the sunken oval tub.

Herrera was watching Sawbill closely.

"According to what we've been

able to piece together with the help of the building computer, Jordan broke in some time around three in the morning. Probably he just wanted to talk to the girl. For some reason she had forgotten to set her doorseal. When he came in he found them on the rug. There, in front of the fireplace." Herrera pointed. "He didn't even try to talk to them, is my guess. Could be he'd taken something. Blood analysis and tissue evaluation show the presence of complex hormones in his body. Puzzled the lab boys for quite a while. They're not used to seeing that kind of stuff."

Herrera watched Sawbill steadily.

"A fast check on Jordan's credit count revealed the recent transfer of the rather surprising sum of twenty-one thousand credits to one individual. You."

"This whole procedure is quite illegal," injected Sawbill mildly.

"Oh, to be sure, to be sure," said Herrera. "Our information cannot be used in court—and obviously is not going to be."

"I have tapes of the transaction, too."

"I'm sure you do," replied Herrera. "And I've no doubt it was all done with the greatest respect for the letter of the law."

"Quite."

"I'm going to have to compose some sort of explanation for the faxpax and for relatives. These people were no bums. Three nominally respected citizens have died here. Just for my own information and to satisfy my morbid curiosity, what did you sell him?"

"Anger."

"I see. Anger." Herrera looked around and took in the wholesale carnage. "A little anger did all this?"

"Ordinarily it would not. You must believe that."

"Oh, sure. Yeah."

Sawbill shrugged. "I agree with you. When Jordan walked in on Wu and the girl I don't think he'd taken a thing. Knowing the sort he was I expected him to try reason after what I'd told him."

"I'll bet you did."

"I mean that! Otherwise I wouldn't have sold to him. Neither man was inherently vicious. I warned Jordan enough against taking the seven. But when he came in and found them making love he obviously went berserk. The seven integrals of the star should be taken an hour apart. That's leaving a quarter-hour safety limit, which I never mention. A half-hour is the real danger point. He must have downed them all at once. The result is unimaginable to most men. Overwhelming. Few minds could handle such an abrupt release. He couldn't. But I

was correct about his innate mental control and discipline."

Herrera gestured angrily around them. "You call this control?"

"Yes! He had enough sense left to kill himself. He did kill himself?"

"We took the knife back to the lab," admitted Herrera.

"What he was undergoing was to normal anger as a nova is to a normal sun. A less controlled individual would have stumbled from the room and gone to kill a hundred people in an orgy of release."

"I don't understand how any drug can boost an emotion like that," murmured Herrera, shaking his head.

"It doesn't 'boost' the emotion —or add to it or multiply it," Sawbill said. "That's the common mistake everyone makes. They don't consider the other—those who don't want to believe it. The drug removes the natural safeguards a man's mind has built up to protect and regulate his natural self. It breaks the seal holding air in the tank, doesn't pump more air into it. It removed a million years of evolutionary barriers man has carefully erected to hold back the blackness that lives inside him. Taken properly it does so in the smallest way. It isn't dangerous, just effectively awesome. Few men can resist the tiny blot of animal self so set free.

"But when all the safeguards are removed, like this. . . ."

"I think I see," whispered Herrera.

"May I leave now?"

"What? Oh, yes, you can go. Get out of my sight."

Sawbill paused at the door.

"What about the girl?"

"How do you mean? Oh, I understand. What you might expect. She was playing one off against the other. Jordan was a little more naive than Wu, I suspect. I hope she enjoyed it." Herrera paused. Then: "I checked you with Central and Customs, hoping I could get you on illegal entry. No such luck. I see you got your doctorate in endocrinology from the University of Belem. That's on Terra, isn't it?"

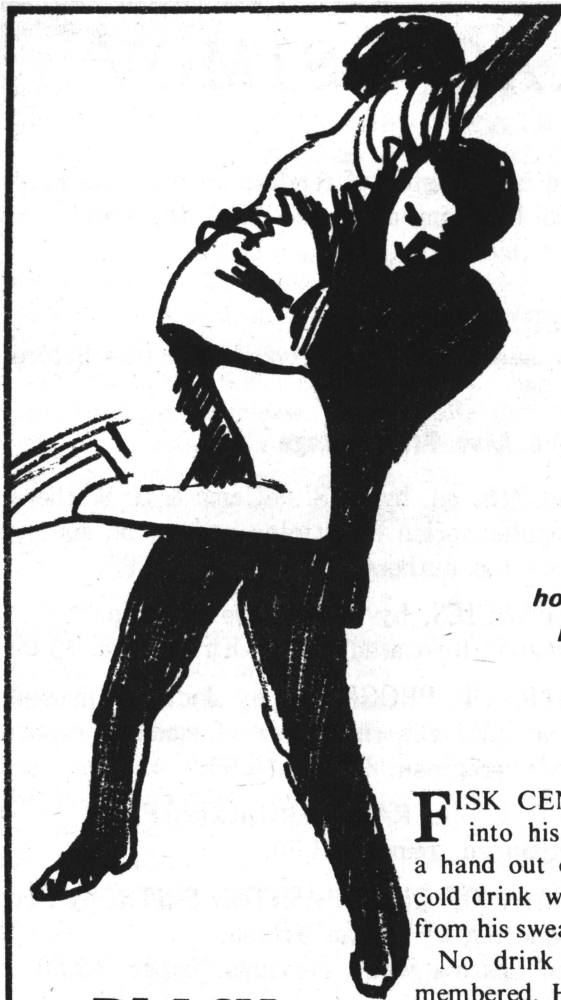
Sawbill nodded. He was halfway out of the room.

"One other thing," Herrera said hurriedly. "I've never met one of you before. Tell me, is it true what they say about you Emomen?"

"What do they say about us Emomen?"

"That you haven't any true emotions of your own? That you're so tied up in playing God that you've lost your own capacity to feel? That your humanity's atrophied?"

"Oh, there's no doubt about it," said Sawbill. He closed the door quietly behind him. ●



BLACK BABY

PIERS ANTHONY

She had light-years to get to her new home—but decided to live them right here!

I

FISK CENTERS sank wearily into his foamer. He reached a hand out of the froth to dial a cold drink while the suit dissolved from his sweaty torso.

No drink came. Then he remembered. His credit balance was down and half his apartment appliances were out of service until he made a repair of his financial situation.

"I'm too old to be destitute," he lamented, still hardly believing

the situation. But he had not been too old to lose a gamble to increase his fortune—a gamble he had been talked into by a hard-sell outfit.

Frustrated, he stepped out, letting the spume drain away. He punched for a new suit, knowing that a brave new exterior would refresh his spirit.

The suiter did not produce.

Fisk stood naked, slowly coming to grips with his condition. He had never before suffered from malnutrition of credit and he had hardly gotten the feel of it yet. There was no clothing in his apartment. Why should there be, when the day's attire was always conveniently recycled after use?

He had nothing to wear.

He was no lean, muscular youth who could trot outside in Adamic splendor and stare down anyone who blinked. When properly suited Fisk was portly—bare, he was, bluntly, fat. He would not, of course, be that way long if he failed to find some way to renew his credit.

He had been politely inquiring about situations for a gentleman with his qualifications—and receiving tacit demurrals. Hunger would very shortly put an end to that. It was past time to hustle out and get a job. If he could only figure out how.

He punched for the newsfax wants ads and was relieved to see the paper slide into the hopper. As long as he could communicate he could function.

Quickly he eliminated the ads obviously intended for women, for youth and for specialists. The economy was in one of its perennial recessions and there were few promising entries for the untrained. The main field available to him was sales.

Fisk winced. He had been reduced to his present circumstances by a salesman. But the episode had certainly been a kind of experience. Why couldn't he himself sell a legitimate product?

But as he read more closely he discovered that sales, too, demanded specialization. He could not afford even the nominal six-week hiatus for insurance training—he needed a credit balance now. He could hardly peddle household machinery when the first requirement was to purchase the demonstrator models. He could not even go for a preliminary interview in this present dishabille. And he absolutely refused to go into illicit land sales.

The remaining offerings were scant, and not particularly enticing. *Artificial Manure, no exp. req.* That stank! *Artistic Photography, Special Interest,*

50% comm. No—he was not ready to peddle pornography. *Intangible, must travel.* No doubt that salesman had to travel—when his intangible product turned out also to have intangible value.

IN THIS morass one item snagged his wandering eye and hauled it back. *Call collect.* No product, no requirement, just call the number.

Well, whoever ran that one understood Fisk's desperation. He could apply there even if his phone credit stalled. So he punched the number, collect.

To his slight surprise the call was accepted. A nervous-looking middle-aged woman appeared on the screen. She looked at him sharply. "Yes?"

"My name is Fisk Centers. I'm interested in employment. Your ad—"

"I know what the ad says," she snapped. "If this is your idea of a joke at our expense—"

Fisk belatedly remembered that he was unclothed. He had been so preoccupied by his predicament that—well, too late now. Honesty was always the best and only policy. "I'm—broke. My suiter's been interdicted. I need a credit balance in a hurry—as you can see. I shall be happy to provide my identity code if you wish to verify—"

She smiled fleetingly. "I see. The position is open. Expenses and commission. If you qualify."

"I have to tell you I'm fifty and untrained in sales. I suffered a business loss—"

"Oh? What kind? If you were rolled—"

"I bought into Mars, Inc. Limited, I mean. Mars, Limited. Ten lots in Elysium Acres. Cash."

She whistled. "They say one's born every minute, but your kind comes only once a week. You lost—"

"—the shirt off my back," Fisk finished, trying to smile.

"At least," she said, eying him again. "When can you report?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You want a job, don't you?"

"Oh." Fisk had been so well braced against turndown that he was hardly prepared. "As soon as I get dressed. Uh—"

"We'll call it a business expense," she said. "Have a suit on us, Mr. Centers." And the OPERATIVE light flashed on the suiter.

"But I don't even know your business," he protested feebly as he hastened to the unit.

"Mr. Johns will explain all that at the office." She paused. "You can work with nonwhites?"

"I pride myself on my inflexible nonbigotry."

"But you understand that a certain discretion may be necessary."

"I can keep my mouth shut." He was familiar enough with middle-class values to realize that this constituted a pretty compelling agreement. He could take the job or reject it, but he could not talk about it elsewhere.

She smiled again, this time with genuine warmth. "Mr. Centers, I think you'll do very well with our organization."

FISK was met at the office by a hard-looking young man. "I'm Chic Johns, procurement. You'll be on sales, of course. Know anything about the adoption racket?"

"Nothing. I—"

"Good. We'll tell you all you need to know. We sell babies."

"I don't think I understand."

Johns appraised him synically. "Right. You look like a businessman and you talk like one. We like that. Just remember—we don't gab about business matters to third parties. You take the client's order and deliver the body and collect the cash. We do the rest. All in strict privacy. Right?"

"But I understood it was against the law to assign a monetary value to—"

"It's like this, Centers. The state agencies charge for costs, always inflated, which is really the same thing as selling for a profit. Thousand dollars minimum for a live body. They make their bundle, never you fear. But they're choosy as hell. No black on white or yellow on black—know what I mean? If the client balks they find him 'unqualified' and he's on the blacklist and can die childless for all they care—he's out. Lots of good potential parents get hung up that way. So it's up to us private concerns to fill the vacuum. We don't ask questions—we don't have restrictions. Client tells us what he wants and we get it for a price—just like any other business."

Fisk found this hard to assimilate. "But these are human beings. Surely you wouldn't place an innocent baby with unfit parents."

Johns shrugged. "I wouldn't. But my end is procurement, not placement. You're the one who decides on parental qualifications. But remember, we don't have the staff to do a damn security check on every family that wants a child. And who's to say who's fit or unfit? Some pretty rough people are mighty good to their kids—and some pillars of society, the kind the state agencies like, are raising speed demons, not to mention the

real addicts. Our record is at least as good as the state's when you consider the family, not the class—and we deliver much faster. So we just charge enough to discourage anybody who's in it for laughs. Would you pay three, four grand for a piddling black baby if you didn't mean to take care of it?"

"No, of course not. But—"

"So okay. Here's the procedure book. Take it home, study it today. Tomorrow's your first ass."

"Ass?"

"Assignment. Tomorrow maybe you'll place a poor black baby in a rich white home, Centers. Twenty per cent commission on the gross. Maybe eight hundred dollars for a day's work. Like the notion?"

"I'll, er, try my best," Fisk said uncertainly.

It was a job.

THE book was far more sophisticated in language than Chic Johns had been, providing elegant explanations and justifications for private adoption procedures. But the man's callous summary seemed essentially correct. State regulations were so complex and picayune and state agency staffs so overworked that many worthy prospective parents were unfairly denied adoptive children. Many innocent babies were forced to grow up in impersonal institutions, where they soon became so backward as to be unadoptable. Even a bad family appeared, on balance, to be a superior environment for a child than a good state orphanage. A child needed parents.

But Fisk, doubly wary after his bilking by Mars, Ltd.—accomplished via its plausible sales pitch—checked carefully for pitfalls. This manual could be biased, deliberately distorting the state agency picture in order to justify the need for an intrusion by private enterprise.

He phoned the library information service and verified that state institutions were run according to strict and basically fair precepts, so that orphans were not actually deprived—but adoption into families was still preferable. He learned that no adoption was legal unless court-approved, so that if this seeming detail were omitted a child could be taken away at any time from even the most loving and competent parents. The main complaint lodged against black-market outfits was their frequent failure to nail down adoptions in court.

The procedure book Chic Johns had given him was supposed to contain all he needed to know about placing a child for adoption. Yet it made no reference to the court requirement.

Fisk reviewed the library material carefully. Theoretically it was impossible for a baby to be adopted without court sanction—i.e., via black market. But now that he had a notion which lines to read between, he saw that there were avenues. The problem was not the placement, for many more people wanted children than the supply could accommodate. The problem was the acquisition. A few babies might be born unrecorded—but the overwhelming majority arrived in hospitals or with sanctioned medical supervision and all of these were duly recorded. Once recorded, they were in the computerized system—the state knew the approximate whereabouts of every recorded human being. But some officials were susceptible to corruption and supervisory agencies were chronically overworked, so there was a practical loophole for a continuing siphoning of babies theoretically destined for legitimate placement. If no one complained and no one checked to make certain a given baby had arrived, the computer's entry was in fact fictitious—sometimes.

But it would be premature to assume that he had landed in such a black-market enterprise, Fisk told himself. He had gotten in trouble before by jumping to conclusions—and he needed the job. The court would make its own investigation at the time of the adoption—and if anything were wrong the transaction would be avoided. It was the ethical responsibility of the placement agent—himself—to make arrangements for such legal blessing.

A small unease nagged at him subliminally, but the thought of an eight-hundred-dollar commission for one day's work forced aside his final doubts. His best course was to try to do the job honestly before judging it. He could always quit once he had verified the facts, if that was the way it went.

II

THE woman was back on duty in the morning. "All set, Mr. Centers?" she inquired over mounded paperwork.

"Ready to try," he said. "I'll need to know a lot more, but I should be able to work it out as I go along."

"Good. Here's your first lead. Find out what they want and report back here. Don't talk business over the phone—we never do that. Remember, make no promises. Just say you'll try."

That simple! Fisk took the card

she proffered and read it: Michael Ormand, with an address in one of the newer apartment complexes.

But why no business over the phone? An order was a fairly straightforward thing.

Ormand was a genial muscular man of about thirty, with a scalped-looking crewcut. Under it Fisk detected the inset metal contacts of a spaceman. He tried not to stare. He knew about the brain-to-machine synapses used by interplanetary crewmen, but had never seen the implants at close quarters before.

"Mars shuttle?" Fisk inquired, feeling a twinge. It was foolish for him to resent everything connected with Mars, but the wound still pained.

"Venus," Ormand answered. "But I'm through with all that. No more shuttling. Going to retire now I've made my pile. Want a family."

"That's what I'm here to discuss," Fisk said with what he hoped was the proper note of professional encouragement. This was easy enough, so far. "May I ask what you plan to do now?"

"It's none of your business, but I'll tell you. I'll grow mugwumps."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Mugwumps. Venusian pseudo-plants. Very pretty, use no water or sunlight, smell like a lemon. They're in big demand here on Earth, but I'm not doing it for the money. Made my pile already, as I said. Challenge, you know. Never been cultivated before."

Fisk made a mental note to look up mugwumps—he had not heard the word in this connection before. "I see. What kind of child were you thinking of adopting? You understand we are a private, fee-charging agency. We do our best, but we can't make promises—except that we don't collect until we deliver."

"Sure. No red tape—that's what I like. I figure a little girl, nine or ten. Healthy, you know?"

"Nine or ten months," Fisk repeated, writing it down.

"Months? Years! What would I want with a squalling baby?"

"Oh," Fisk said, nonplused. "Sorry. I thought—uh—how long have you been married?"

"Married? Spacemen don't marry. What would I want with a gold-digging wife?"

Fisk choked. "Mr. Ormand, If you want to adopt—"

"That's why I want to adopt. A nice, sweet little girl. Catch her before she gets bitchy, train her right, you know? Older women are unmanageable."

"But—"

"You're single, aren't you? You know what women are like."

"But you can't adopt when you're single."

Ormand glanced at him in surprise. "I can't?"

"Of course not. Only married couples can—"

The man smiled. "Oh, that's the agency pitch. Sure. That's why I called you. To cut that bilge. Look, you don't need to beat up the price on me. I told you I'm loaded. Don't worry about it. Find me what I want and I'll pay. Within reason. I know what the range is for this sort of thing. And I'll give you a little bonus on the side for prompt service. Fair enough?"

Fisk was afraid of what would come out if he opened his mouth, so he kept it closed. Somehow he made his exit in good order.

"TEN - YEAR - OLD girl? Sure, we can get," Johns said at the office. "That kind's a glut on the market. And he won't quibble on color or price. Good show, Centers—I can see you've got the knack."

This was not the response Fisk had anticipated. He had supposed the sale doomed. "But he's single."

"So?"

"What about the law?"

Johns made a face as though he had heard a bad word. "What about it? Didn't you read the book? Singles can adopt—if they have the means to make a good home. And this guy does. He'll bite for five grand, wait and see. Grand for you, grand for me—and grand for business."

Fisk felt vaguely nauseated, but he didn't want to imperil his income by raising uninformed objections. A thousand dollars could go a long way in reconstituting his life style. "Do you have a ten-year-old girl? Uh, in stock?"

"You think I keep that kind packed in desk drawers? I'll find one," Johns said confidently. "Just a matter of making the connection—and a little quiet negotiation. Two days, maybe. Don't you worry about that. My end of the business, procurement. Just you go out on your next ass and see if you can land another order to match the first."

Fisk retained strong personal reservations about this business, but he went. As it happened, the leads fizzled. Some people merely wanted information. Others backed off when it came to the point of actually ordering a baby. One lady seemed to be more interested in finding a husband and Fisk barely escaped intact. Ormand was right—some older women did get predatory. Meanwhile, however much he might look the part, he was not a high-pressure salesman.

On the third day Johns barged into the office, hauling along a screaming tantrum of a spitfire. "Got her!" he exclaimed breathlessly, shoving the creature into the center of the room and leaning against the door. Blood dripped from a scratch on his cheek and his suit was torn in a couple of places, but he was smiling. "What a job!"

Abruptly the commotion ceased. A young girl of indeterminate color and culture stood there.

"Hi," she said to Fisk, nodding her short black tangle of hair pertly. "You the sucker?"

Fisk turned to Johns, dismayed. "Surely this isn't—"

"Surely this is! Take her to your client and get the money. Real bargain for him. See those classic facial lines? That animal vigor? That instant self-control? You know the price."

Fisk found the moral ramifications too fast to contemplate on the spot, so he shelved them in favor of details. "He—he wants a—a nice sweet little girl."

"I'm nice and sweet," the girl snarled. "When I want to be."

"Would you want to be sweet for a man who'll shell out five grand for you?" Johns asked her with a half-smile.

"Five grand?" she exclaimed, delighted. "Am I worth all that?"

"If you behave. At least until the deal's complete. After that, who cares? You're in."

"Yeah, who cares?" she echoed, with momentary mischief. Despite their manner of entry, Johns and the girl appeared to have a certain mutual appreciation of each other's motives.

Fisk had been concerned for the welfare of the child, but now he suspected that the client was the sucker she had implied. Should he proceed with this transaction?

What would he eat if he didn't? He had made no other sales (placed no other children, he corrected himself), so his commission was zero. The office petty cash wouldn't carry him long. Sheer need was bruising his scruples.

"Okay, Centers—now take her away," Johns commanded briskly. "Clean her up and feed her first, so she doesn't snatch. Here are a couple of tokens. Play it cool. But don't turn her over until you get his payment."

FISK took her away, with a stop at a refresher booth to get her cleaned and dressed for presentation. He wished he could do the same for himself—his home foamer had quit the day before and this was his fourth day in a one-day suit. Only extreme care kept him from looking seedy.

Of course he could always sell

one of his Mars lots. But those were worth only one per cent what he had paid, and he couldn't bring himself to convert that paper loss to cash. Marsland might eventually improve.

"What's your name?" he asked belatedly as she foamed.

"Yola. Hey, I've never been in a public booth before. Neat!" Her voice emerged from a speaker beside the entrance. There was no vision screen, of course.

"How did Johns get you?" Fisk couldn't bring himself to use the term "procure" in this connection.

"The usual. I was doing time in solitary 'cause I—aw, never, mind. The cage was glad to unload me—and not for any five grand, either."

"The orphanage sold you?"

"They don't call it that. Order came through the Juvenile Parole Agency, which is a legit division of Youth Services. But somewhere along the way I got shunted—and here I am."

"You mean you were abducted from your lawful guardian?"

"You don't know much, do you? It was just in the paperwork. Same thing, I guess. The usual, I said."

"But how could you be transferred from a state institution to a—to here?"

"If I knew I'd know enough not to talk about it," she said uncomfortably. Then she changed the subject. "Is it a nice family?"

"It's a single man. Spacer."

She didn't respond right away and Fisk hardly needed to inquire why. Children in institutions learned early about life, and the spacers were notorious for their planetfall orgies. The situation was developing into something a far cry from the philanthropic service Fisk had hopefully anticipated.

"Well, let's go," she said, emerging. Fisk had feared she had punched some outrageous replacement outfit, but she was tastefully dressed for her age: eleven. She was small, looked undernourished and not black-skinned, though she obviously derived from mixed ancestry. She looked tanned on the body and the faintly Negroid cast about her features was not obvious at a casual glance. No doubt neither pure black nor pure white had wanted her as a baby, as neither considered brown beautiful. So she was here.

"So whatcha gaping at?" she demanded.

He guided her to the fooder and inserted the second token. "Punch what you want—and make sure you have enough to fill up," he advised, hoping she would order so much that he would get to abate his sudden hunger on the surplus. He had been scrimping on meals.

She looked at him sidelong, punched a supersoda and a miniature dog biscuit.

"For you," she said, proffering the latter.

Fisk was too hungry to be properly furious. He chewed on the biscuit while she slurped the giant confection noisily. An unlimited one-sitting fooder order gone to waste!

But his conscience hung on. "Are you sure you want to go through with this, Yola? A single man—"

"A single—loaded—man. Think I'm dumb? Better'n solitary, for sure. I'll get to see shows, sleep late, eat anything I want—"

"Then why were you fighting so hard when Johns brought you in?"

"I don't like being told what to do."

"Do you always throw a tantrum when—"

"Always. Matter of principle."

"That could get you into trouble."

She contemplated him obliquely as the soda drained to vociferous dregs. "My middle name, Grandad."

"Don't call me Grandad."

"Don't tell me what to call you—" she screamed, not stinting on the volume. It was amazing how far a soprano voice carried. People stopped in the street outside to look up and Fisk fought to keep the flush off his face. Then, sweetly: "—grandad."

Fisk decided to ignore it. "We have an appointment, Yola."

"Right, Centers," she agreed with continued insolence. But he was determined not to let her have the satisfaction of his reaction.

MIKE ORMAND was pleased. "Very nice," he said, studying Yola with more critical intensity than Fisk thought appropriate for such an interview. He half hoped the child would pull an instant tantrum and void the placement, but for the moment she was every inch the demure pre-teen. "Here's your check, sir. Five grand, certified."

"Just a minute," Fisk protested. "You can't just—"

"Why not, Mr. Centers?" Yola asked innocently. She turned to Ormand. "May I call you Dad?"

"Sure, Kid. Go punch yourself a soda," he said amiably. "No hard stuff, now." Then, to Fisk: "Don't worry. I didn't forget yours. I know how it goes. I made it out separately. So your office wouldn't know. Five hundred." He handed over the second check, winking.

"I'm not talking about that" Fisk's moral anguish was becoming tempered by the greed of desperation. Five hundred would fuel his

finances for a couple of weeks. "You—you two—you don't even know each other."

"What's to know, Mr. Centers?" Yola inquired prettily over her soda. This one didn't slurp—she sipped it with delicacy. "Dad's got a nice layout here, a real home. He's a nice guy."

"Yeah," Ormand agreed. "I've got what she wants—she's what I want and you've got your money. So it's done. We're all happy and thank you. Now toddle off, Centers. You're interfering in family business."

"Yeah," Yola echoed almost inaudibly.

They were both reasonably satisfied, neither being quite the bargain the other supposed—and Fisk did have the money. Why should he object? He had performed his function. He had a thousand-dollar commission coming for this transaction. Yet he balked, feeling like a pimp.

He said, "We have to complete the contract and make arrangements for the formal adoption. There'll have to be a court hearing and—"

"A what?" Ormand demanded incredulously. Then he caught himself. "Oh, sure. I'll take care of that. You don't need to bother."

"I do need to bother," Fisk said, his stubborn streak coming into play. "Somebody could take her away from you at any time, no matter how long—"

"Oh, that's it," Ormand said, seeming relieved. "That's okay. Nothing's going to happen inside of ten days, is it?"

"Not that I know of. But there is no expiration on a counterclaim of this nature. If a natural parent showed up in five years—"

Ormand laughed. "Fat chance. They'd never follow where we're going!"

"Where are we going, Dad?" Yola inquired.

"To Venus, of course. Got my one-way passes for the next liftoff, just ten days away."

Yola spat out a mouthful of soda. "Venus!"

"Sure, kid. To farm mugwump. It only grows on Venus, you know."

"But there aren't any shows on Venus!" Yola shrieked as though mortally wounded. "No foamers, no fooders, no autobeds. It's just a perpetual sandstorm!"

"Right. Real challenge. Ideal for mugwumps and no neighbors to butt in, except for the shuttle every four months. Great life."

"In a spacesuit!" she wailed, her anguish intensifying. "All day! And the trip there takes six months cooped up in an old tin can with nothing but nasty ol' vacuum trying to get in—"

"The vacuum doesn't come in," Ormand said. "The air goes out if there's a leak. And the trip takes longer right now because of the phase. And it's getting worse. That's why I have to make a tight schedule. The free fall gets to you if you stay in space too long, specially if you're not used to it."

"Free fall?" she repeated faintly. "I get sick just in the downshaft—"

"I don't understand," Fisk said. "If you're settling on Venus —why are you adopting a girl?"

"Why do you *think* he wants a girl. Grandad?" Yola asked.

"Well, it's a long trip out and a rough, lonely life," Ormand said reasonably. "What grown woman would sign up for it?"

"A desperate one," Fisk said. "No other."

"Just count me out, Ormand," Yola cried. "I'm no Lolita!"

Fisk couldn't resist needling her, though he was privately relieved about her change of heart. "You didn't object before, Yola."

"He wasn't going to Venus before!"

"I was," Ormand said. "That's why I—"

"You stay out of this, child-buyer!" she screamed at him.

"Watch who you're sassing, kid," he snapped back. His temper was about as quick as hers.

She threw the soda cup at him. "I'll sass anybody I please, you—oh!"

ORMAND had grabbed her and was hauling her over his knee. He flipped her short skirt up over her back. "No daughter of mine is going to sass her elders," he said as his hand came down resoundingly on her little posterior.

Yola screeched incoherently. Fisk had some sympathy with each party and did not interfere. Yola certainly had no reason to like Venus, but Ormand was taking the kind of firm disciplinary action Fisk envied. They were working it out.

Then Yola jackknifed and bit the man on the ankle. It was Ormand's turn to exclaim with pain and rage. By the time he recovered his bearings Yola had scooted across the room.

Fisk had been pleasantly bemused by the suddenness and violence of these proceedings, but now he stepped between the fighters. "I'm afraid this isn't going to work. Here are your checks back, Mr. Ormand. I'll return this girl to the—"

"Uh-*uh*!" Yola said.

"No, you don't, Centers," Ormand rapped simultaneously, slapping the checks to the floor.

"I don't have time to get another girl. This one'll be fine once I get her broken in."

"Go break in your fat head!" Yola cried, casting about for something else to throw.

Fisk caught her by the wrist and hustled her out of the apartment and this time she didn't object to being directed. Ormand charged after them, but Yola ducked back and tripped him with professional dispatch. He sprawled ignominiously. Fisk wondered just what sort of education children obtained in state orphanages, for spacers were normally sure on their feet.

He and Yola ran to the exit chute and jumped in. She did look a little queasy in that brief free fall, though several factors could account for that.

The house alarm was already sounding as they boarded the transport for the office. Ormand must have called the police. Fisk and Yola were on their way and by the time the police net tightened. . .

"Let him rant," Fisk said angrily as the capsule popped into its vacuum tunnel and accelerated. "The adoption was never consummated. He has no call on you."

"Good," she said. "Where are we headed now?"

"To the office. Then Johns will return you to the orphanage—or wherever you came from."

"Not me," she said. "I hate that place."

"But you agreed to go back. I heard you—in the apartment."

"I said uh-*uh*, not uh-*huh*, Grandad."

"You don't want to go to Venus, do you?"

"No. But I'm not going back in local solitary either," she said.

"I don't see what choice you have—unless another client happens to be looking for a girl your age. And frankly, your spot tantrums don't make you very—"

"What do you want to do with these?" she asked, interrupting him. "They're made out to you, you know."

"I'll just explain the situation at the office—" He stopped, seeing what she held. "What are you doing with—"

"Ormand's checks?" she said innocently. "I figured we might need the money so I scooped them up while—"

"His checks? Yola, that represents either stealing or acceptance of payment. It gives him a theoretical basis to—"

"To sue?" she inquired with mock astonishment. "Gee, you could get in bad trouble, Centers—"

All vehicles halt in place, the capsule loudspeaker said. *Stand by for inspection . . .*

"No wonder he's mad," Fisk said as he punched the HALT button. "I didn't realize we'd taken his money."

"Mistake, huh?" she said, looking at the checks.

III

SOMETIMES she was unbearable, but this time she seemed genuinely contrite.

"Bad mistake," he told her.

Open vent. The police had connected a pressurized tube—the capsule could not be opened in the tunnel vacuum.

Reluctantly, Fisk pressed the OPEN stud.

"You dope!" Yola cried, slapping the CANCEL button before the machinery functioned. "They'll hang you!" She hit EMERGENCY ACCELERATION next.

"What are you doing?" Fisk exclaimed as the vehicle shot forward with a force possible only in vacuum, ripping away the police tube.

"Making your getaway, Grandad," she said. "No sense having you in the hole for theft."

"But I was going to return the checks and explain—"

"And let me hang?"

"You have an unduly suspicious mind. Once the mistake is clarified, nobody will—"

"Uh-*uh*. Get that *uh* this time, Centers. You aren't going to return that money and void the sale. I told you I'm not going back to the pen. Not for anything."

"Do you mean you are willing to let me be charged with resisting the police—just so you stay out of a legitimate orphanage? I can't believe that."

"You can't, huh?" She considered for a moment. "Well, would you believe kidnaping?"

"Yola! Of all the ridiculous—"

"Or maybe child-molestation? My word against yours, Centers. Want to see my act?"

Suspect running. Cut power in tunnel. . .

Fisk knew how guilty that sudden flight made him seem. Why *would* he take Ormand's money, then break out of a routine police net? With a screaming eleven-year-old girl? Yola really could hang him. And she was brat enough to do it.

He had once hoped—no matter how weakly—that his job would benefit his fellow man and make people happy.

"You're pretty much of a sucker, aren't you," Yola said as the capsule drifted to a lifeless stop. "What are you doing in a racket like this?"

"Just being a sucker," Fisk admitted, demoralized. "A Mars-

land salesman took me and I'm broke."

She looked at him as she might have at a broken-winged bird. "Well, we're caught anyway. It's nothing personal, Centers. Maybe I'd better go back to Ormand. He's the kind of bastard I don't mind scr—"

"Yola!"

"Oh come off it, grandad—you have a dirty mind. I mean I can always run away before he goes to Venus. So he'll get what he deserves—nothing."

Her spark of charity was as awkward as her ruthlessness. "But that's dishonest. If you don't intend to—"

"All right, sucker. It was only a silly notion to get you off the hook—'cause you're a decent sort under all that quaint naivete." She began tearing up her recently machined hairdo. "By the time they get this kidnap/molestation rap untangled, Ormand'll be on Venus, you'll be in the clink for trial and I'll be a ward of the court—where maybe I can finagle a better deal for number one. Will that make you feel better?"

Fisk saw that to attempt to reason with this gutter child was futile. The police were already applying another pressure-exit to the capsule. He would simply have to present his case and hope the police considered all aspects of the situation before doing anything irrevocable. Certainly he was not going to capitulate to this attempted extortion.

"You're so cubical you're a tesseract," she exclaimed. "Look, Grandad, you're a nonsurvival type. If you'll just shut up and let me handle it I can—"

The capsule opened. "Crawl out in a hurry—you're blocking traffic," a police voice called down the tube.

Fisk's mind was still on Yola's offer to complicate things yet further. "Never—" he cried to her.

NATURALLY the police misunderstood. A sleepdart buzzed along the tube like a vengeful fly and pinked Fisk on the sweaty forehead—and he found himself standing insecurely before a tall desk in the police station. Yola was beside him and Ormand had a chair nearby. The law could be devastatingly efficient when it snared the innocent.

"—serious charge. Kidnaping a minor from a private apartment," the lieutenant behind the desk said as the dart nullifier took effect. "Do you understand you have the right to consult counsel before making your statement?"

"I'm sure I can explain everything without the necessity of

counsel," Fisk said hastily, knowing that the police preferred dispatch. "This girl—"

"What he means is," Yola interjected, "we were just going to the court to arrange for the adoption."

"You were?" Ormand asked, surprised and, oddly, not particularly pleased. "I thought—"

"We were not!" Fisk said. "I was taking her back to—"

Yola kicked him. "To fetch the adoption papers," she said.

The lieutenant turned to Ormand. "What's this about adoption? You told us your daughter had been kidnapped."

Ormand hesitated. "I—ah—maybe there was a misunderstanding. I'll just take her home now." He came up and grabbed Yola's arm.

"Get your filthy paw off me!" she screamed automatically. "You can't tell me what to do, you child-beater!"

The lieutenant made a note. "Child-beating."

Fisk had a certain grudging sympathy for Ormand, who still thought a simple spanking or two would bring Yola into line. He would learn.

The desk phone lighted. "For you," the lieutenant said to Fisk, turning the screen to face him.

It was Johns. "What's this about your being arrested?" Johns demanded. "We run a respectable outfit here. You're fired, Centers."

"But I've still got the child. The adoption can't—"

Johns screwed up his face in perplexity. "Child? Adoption? I don't know what you're talking about. Have you been messing around with something on the side?"

Fisk began to see what sort of a bag he was to be left holding. Naturally Johns wouldn't admit in the hearing of the police to dealing in black-market babies.

"But—"

"Just get our eighty per cent to us pronto and we'll forget the embezzlement charge," Johns finished, clicking off.

The policeman made another note. "Embezzlement." He looked up. "Are you sure you don't need an attorney?"

"This is all a misunderstanding—" Fisk felt hopeless. If he returned the checks to Ormand, Johns would charge him with embezzlement of company funds. If he kept them, Ormand had him on kidnaping. Both men were ruthless enough to hang the intermediary. And Yola had not yet even started on her child-molestation act.

"THERE'S funny business somewhere," the lieutenant

said thoughtfully. "Damn funny." He turned to Ormand. "This is a nonwhite child and you're a white spacer. She can't be your natural issue."

"Sure I could," Yola said, keeping her options open. "My mother's black and I won't say what business she's in, but it's near the spaceport. She—"

"Yeah," Ormand agreed, manifestly not pleased but riding with the inevitable. "You know how it is."

"How old are you, Ormand?" the lieutenant snapped.

"Twenty-nine. That's why I'm retiring. You have to call it quits after thirty."

"And you?" he said to Yola.

"Eleven."

The lieutenant turned back to Ormand. "And how old is the minimum for a space license?"

"Twenty-one." Then Ormand saw the trap. "Well, maybe before I—"

"Looks like a black-market operation to me," the lieutenant said. "Five to two you're an ineligible parent. Single, with no permanent home—and you know you can't take an underage child offplanet—"

"No, no!" Ormand cried, turning pale even for a spacer.

"So you paid a fat check to a shyster outfit to sneak through a black baby I know damn well you weren't going to any court for adoption, whatever you told the child."

Ormand fell back, whipped.

Without seeming to take a breath the lieutenant pounced on Fisk, who had just started to relax. "And you, Centers. You represent that black-market racket, squeezing human blood out of both ends. You're selling an innocent ward of the state to an ineligible child-beater, embezzling on the side and maybe kidnaping, too—"

"Yeah," Yola said, enjoying this. "Don't forget child moles—"

"And to top it off the brat's a little bitch nobody can handle without a whip in one hand and a prayer book in the other."

"Yeah," Fisk and Ormand agreed together. Yola glared.

The lieutenant smiled knowledgeably. "In short, three fine fat fish on the line, suckers all, tugging the hooks into each other. As if I didn't have important cases to handle in my off-days! Now are you three going to work out your own squabble or you want me to do it for you?"

Yola and Ormand both quailed, but Fisk had an inspiration. "Lieutenant, if you will permit us a moment to confer privately—"

"Sure, I'll wait," the officer said sardonically. "Thirty seconds."

"HERE—now!" Fisk snapped at the other two, pulling them into a huddle. He had never before attempted to manage people so boldly, but desperation gave him genius. "Ormand, if I get you off the hook and find you an age-of-consent girl who's willing—"

"Yeah—yeah," Ormand agreed eagerly. "Keep the money. Just—"

"Yola, if I arrange a legitimate adoption, court-approved, so you'll never have to go back to—"

"Yeah—" she echoed fervently.

"Time," the lieutenant called.

Fisk stepped to the desk. "As I was saying," he said so smoothly he surprised himself, "it was all a misunderstanding. Mr. Ormand was looking for a wife to take to Venus—he's going to be cultivating exotic Venus plants for export to Earth, you know—and the agency thought he meant the phrase 'little girl' literally, not knowing the way spacers talk. When the two were introduced, the error was quickly apparent. He was naturally upset and so was the girl, as you can readily understand. In their confusion they exchanged some unkind words—"

"Yeah—" Ormand muttered thoughtfully.

"So Mr. Ormand may have said 'kidnaped' when he meant 'defrauded.' A natural error in the circumstance. Actually I was taking the child back to—" Here Yola opened her mouth, but he elbowed her warningly. "To assist me in locating the correct subject. One of the sixteen-year-old girls just graduating from the orphanage, eager for the security of marriage. Young enough to be, uh, malleable. Who likes to travel—even as far as Venus, where there would be no female competition for attention."

"Yeah," Ormand said, his face lighting.

The lieutenant nodded. "You wiggle pretty smooth for a worm in human clothing," he said approvingly. "But what about Miss Tantrums, here? You have to shut her up before she says something I might have to jail you for."

Fisk could have done without such candor. "Once we have clarified Mr. Ormand's situation satisfactorily, I will—" Here he paused to gird himself for the sacrifice. "I will take Yola to the court to—to adopt her myself. I am, I believe, an eligible parent."

Yola's mouth fell open. "Gee—really?" she breathed ecstatically.

"Yes, really," Fisk said, hoping he wouldn't regret this decision of expediency for the rest of his life. "I'm young enough to be your father, you know, and I've—er—always wanted a black baby." ●

FREEZEOUT

He needed his tomorrows,
but did they need him?

DONALD FRANSON

THE pain persisted, but Lambert ignored it. It was cold in the plane, but it would be colder outside. He turned up his fur collar, put on his fur hat and walked down the aisle, carrying his light case clumsily with his double-thickness gloves. He felt a twinge in his side as he turned to the doorway and disembarked, down the steps, out onto the frosty runway. There was no wind, but he could feel the icy cold already trying to get at him. He smiled grimly.

Oymyakon, Siberia. The coldest place in the world. The natives didn't seem to mind, bustling about cheerfully in their heavy furs. Lambert walked briskly toward the airport buildings, but before he had gone a dozen steps his face smarted and he wished he had worn a scarf. He quickened his pace and put his free hand over his mouth and nose. The terminal loomed close in the morning mist —the strange "human-habitation fog" of Siberian cities. Below-zero weather ordinarily was accompanied by clear air and sunshine, but not here or at Yakutsk, where he had changed planes from Moscow.

Was this the end of his journey? He hoped so. Seven time zones from Moscow, eight more from New York. He would have gone around the other way if it had been practical. Being here was an accomplishment in itself. Few Americans had visited this part of the world in wintertime. Or wanted to.

Pushing through the door of the terminal, Lambert was greeted by a rush of warm air, then by an old friend who shook his hand, took his case and escorted him to the bar.

"Welcome to the Pole of Cold," David Owen, a small wiry Welshman in Russian dress, grinned. "Sorry I couldn't arrange a record —it's only fifty-eight below this morning. Fahrenheit."

Lambert murmured greetings and thanks, felt the pain in his side and sipped at the drink already set up. He gasped as it burned his lips.

Owen laughed. "That's *Spirt*. It's ninety-six per cent alcohol, doesn't freeze as easily as vodka. Popular around here." He chuckled, then turned serious. "How's the—how's the health?" He looked concerned and Lambert turned away, sipped again, this time more carefully.

"No better," he said softly.

"How long?" asked Owen, eyeing him. Lambert realized he looked trim and fit on the surface.

"I don't know," he admitted. "Pain's been about the same since the operation. They weren't too

definite. Anyway, I didn't lose any time getting here."

"And I'm all ready for you," Owen announced with a look of pride. "Nothing I wouldn't do for an old friend—even if he is a lousy capitalist." Lambert looked up sharply and Owen went on: "Don't worry, no one speaks English around here. But I surprised myself getting you in here. I haven't tried to get a real defector into Siberia before. But I'm grateful for those donations—"

Lambert sighed, said it was nothing. At least he hoped it was nothing—that his financial aid to certain organizations to get him into Siberia would do no harm. Desperation required desperate remedies. He was dying of cancer. Besides, Owen was a real friend despite his affiliations. Lambert had once saved Owen's life in Hong Kong—or had it been the other way around? No matter. Now Owen was going to repay him by killing him—or making him immortal.

IN THE privacy of the taxi—the windows were all frosted over except for the double-glassed windshield—Lambert leaned back and tried to relax. He felt the dull pain again. He toyed with a sudden wish to dash out into the cold and freeze—end the pain—but the desire was weak. He hadn't yet tried suicide—he scarcely knew why. He was not afraid. The reason had to be that he simply wanted to survive, deep down inside. He had never been a loser.

Owen was chattering on, talking about his wife. No, it was Lambert's wife he was asking about.

"She's not my wife any more, Davy," said Lambert. "Not for a long time. She came to see me in the hospital, though. 'Put your faith in doctors or in God—not in a refrigerator,' she said. Now the doctors—and perhaps God—have given up. There remains the refrigerator." Lambert grunted. "She never did understand my recent political activities. 'You, a confirmed conservative, turned communist.' Deception, deception. I didn't deceive you, though."

"I don't mind that sort of deception," said Owen. "Besides, this gives me a chance to prove some of my pet theories and maybe convert you—as well as congeal you."

Lambert shuddered at the Welshman's dark humor. "I ought to be open to conversion. The procedure we're going to attempt isn't as foolproof anywhere else. Or considered quite acceptable."

Owen grinned. "It isn't exactly legal here, either." At Lambert's quick look of concern, he amended this. "It isn't criminal, but—well—

let's just call it unauthorized."

"I hope you're not putting yourself out for me."

"Don't worry," said Owen. "The test of a good worker is whether he can get around rules when he can't follow them. The procedure is officially outlawed. But you are not a Soviet citizen—"

"Why is this particular application of cryogenics outlawed, anyway?" complained Lambert. "What business is it of any government what individuals want to do with their lives?"

"We are all socialists now, remember—the trend is evident even in your country. It is against society that some should be given —by the state—a longevity denied others. Remember the old arguments? What was the name of that club we belonged to? The Society for the Preservation of Experience—

"Bah. That's not what I want to preserve—the law dispersed those fools like dry leaves. There was always more than a sprinkling of crackpots among them. I am somewhat of an authority on psychoceramics, having been exposed to the cancer-cure racket. But this is not just another cancer cure. It's the simple matter of preserving life until science discovers a real cancer cure. And that's just a matter of time."

"Do you believe that?" asked Owen.

"Certainly. And cryogenics for this purpose is going to be accepted eventually, wait and see. Only I can't wait."

Owen peered out through the windshield. The fog had now lifted and they had emerged into bright sunshine. They were outside the limits of Oymyakon—only a few scattered old wooden buildings were visible here and there. Owen spoke a few words in Russian to the driver.

Lambert said, "Aren't we going to a hotel or—"

"To my home? No. I thought you didn't want any delay."

"That's right. I don't."

THE taxi pulled up before a low brick building, isolated in a field of snow. Lambert got out and experienced the cold again. He slapped his gloves to his face, while Owen talked to the driver. The taxi pulled away and they crunched across the squeaking snow. Lambert felt his nose was being frost-bitten. Maybe it didn't matter now, but . . .

The building seemed not much warmer. This was a branch of the Permafrost Institute, Lambert learned. After a slight delay a young Russian technician took them to an elevator. They went

down. And down. And down.

They stopped at the bottom level, apparently the sub-sub-basement, then emerged into a large open space, not a basement, but an underground cavern. At one side were a partitioned office and laboratory from which an older man appeared, greeted Owen, nodded to Lambert.

Owen said, "This is the man I was telling you about—Dr. Oschepkov." He spoke in Russian to the doctor, who looked at Lambert doubtfully, then spoke sharply to Owen, showing an irritation that transcended the language barrier. Lambert thought he understood some of the words, but he waited for Owen's translation.

"He says it's illegal to freeze before clinical death. I told him you couldn't wait for that. He says he's only experimented on foxes." He turned back to Dr. Oschepkov, conducted a long argument, which Lambert didn't try to follow. He felt discouraged—the pain was coming again and it was cold down here. The argument seemed interminable.

Finally Owen turned to him, grinned. "It's all right. I have a bit of influence, you see. But you'll have to sign some papers."

They entered the small office, went through a legal ceremony about which Lambert understood little and cared less. Then the doctor and the young technician bundled up in additional clothing and they all proceeded briskly across the cavern. Lambert found it hard to keep up, but was glad to be walking again. The exercise warmed him a little.

The cave narrowed and became a tunnel. Dr. Oschepkov walked ahead with his assistant, talking in Russian, while Lambert and Owen brought up the rear. Somehow Lambert couldn't think of questions, despite his curiosity, but Owen filled him in satisfactorily.

"This is a natural cave, although it has been expanded somewhat. We're five hundred feet down, right in the heart of the permafrost. Here anything frozen will stay frozen forever without any power expenditure. You needn't fear a power failure."

Lambert said, "But permafrost isn't cold enough for this."

"It's not cold enough to freeze you safely, but it's cold enough to keep you after the freezing process. This is the same cave where they found a mammoth not long ago." Owen grinned. "We're thinking of calling it 'Mammoth Cave.'"

Lambert shuddered. He thought of the perpetually frozen earth all around him and wished he were already lying in it. To sleep . . .

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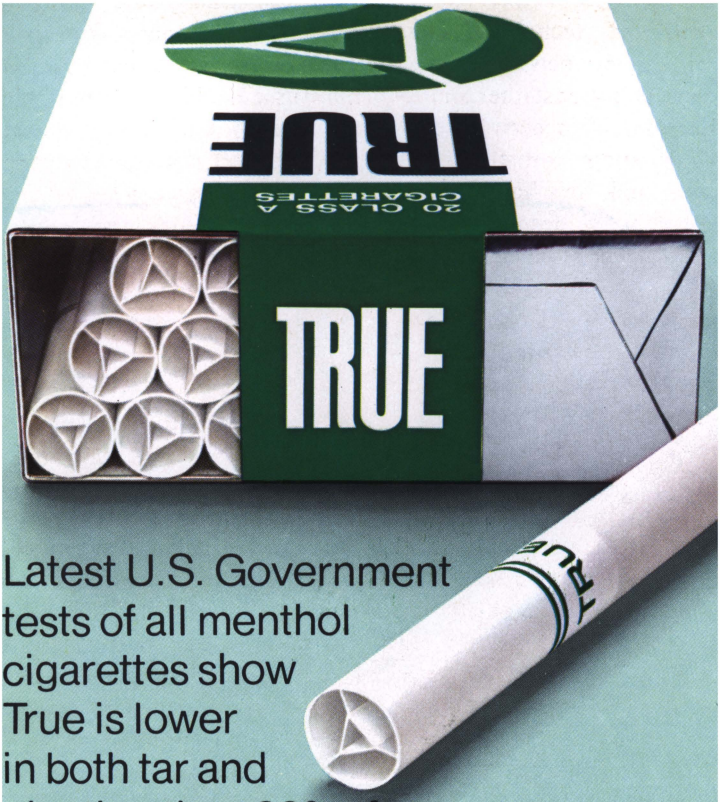

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Owen continued: "They use the liquid nitrogen technique—combined with some new methods—to get you safely past the zone of crystallization. He's been successful with animals, mostly foxes. Frankly, I think he's happy to get a human subject, despite his demurrals. Soon this will be a common thing, he says, though now it's experimental. Don't worry—they know their business. Lately the neighborhood fox farms have been getting some of their foxes back."

This was encouraging, Lambert thought.

They turned into a side corridor, which was even narrower and lower. It was getting colder. The walls were covered white in the dim glare of small lights hanging at intervals. The cold was intense and seemed to make the gloom close in. Like catacombs, Lambert thought. Well, why not? That was what these were.

THEY came to the end of the lights, walked a few hundred yards farther by Oschepkov's flashlight. At the dead end was a gloomy room stacked with strange metal boxes, mostly small, though there was one large one. Lambert tried to shudder but was too cold. He succeeded only in making his teeth chatter.

In the walls were many dark holes, their purpose obvious. Dr. Oschepkov said something in Russian. His assistant tipped the large box upright onto a dolly and trundled it across the room to some machinery. The technician and doctor busied themselves for a long time, setting up complicated tubing and wiring and occasionally seeming to curse and argue.

Lambert wanted to ask Owen, *Do they really know what they're doing?* but his lips refused to open. Owen smiled reassuringly, but said nothing. Lambert huddled inside his inadequate winter clothing, shivering uncontrollably.

God, it was cold. Lambert, waiting, thought only of how cold it was. The tiny pain was almost forgotten in the larger discomfort. Finally the doctor said something and Owen interpreted.

"Strip, he says."

Lambert could only shake his head and shiver wordlessly. He was powerless to answer, even to move.

Dr. Oschepkov spoke in Russian and Owen translated. "He says, 'Do you want to be comfortable—or do you want to awaken?' Cheer up, it won't be long now."

With shaking fingers Lambert tried to comply, but he had to be helped by Owen and the doctor. Finally he stood naked, burning

with cold, blind to any other thought but icy, icy, cold, cold, cold. He could not move. He saw hands grasp him but he could not feel them. They moved him into the box.

He stood there freezing, freezing, and they sprayed him with shocking snow. The door shut and blackness closed in.

From somewhere came a clanging, a ringing. *Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky* . . . Through the cold and the pain he felt the box fill up. Cold. Cold. A little pain—but this was replaced by cold. The cold seemed less. The pain was gone. So was the cold. Peace. *Ring in the thousand years of peace* . . .

HE partially awoke to the sound of bells again. Church bells, they sounded like. Church bells in Siberia? No, this was not Siberia —couldn't be. He felt warm. He lay back and slept again. He dreamed he was in school, reciting a poem, and he knew all the lines. *Ring out wild bells, to the wild sky, the flying cloud, the frosty light; the year is dying in the night; ring out wild bells and let him die* . . . Die? His thoughts were troubled, but there was peace. He skipped to *Ring out old shapes of foul disease* . . . felt a pain and opened his eyes.

He was in a hospital bed, he saw. He lay perfectly at ease and when he wanted to turn, something in the bed helped him. Tubes and wires seemed to be attached to his body beneath the soft blanket that covered him. The ceiling was of restful mixed colors and strange patterns, as was the rest of the interesting room, filled with odd furniture. Even his bed was barely recognizable as a bed. Suddenly his memory came back with a rush.

With knowledge came a nagging pain in his side, small but persistent. He had been revived from the freezer, but had not been operated on as yet. His trip had been seccessful. He was in the future.

He lay back, content with that knowledge. Then he wanted to know more and looked around for a button to push, a bell to ring—something. "Nurse—doctor—" he croaked. What was "doctor" in Russian? He couldn't remember. He groaned as the pain hit him.

The door opened and a dark-haired, not unhandsome woman in tasteful blue and white uniform, entered. "I am Dr. Ivanova." She smiled. "You want something?"

Lambert stared admiringly. "You're Russian." He sighed. "But you speak English. If I am still in Siberia, what are those bells I hear? They sound like church bells."

Her smile vanished, but friendliness remained in her dark eyes. "I speak English because you called for 'nurse' and 'doctor' in English. I am Dr. Irina Ivanova, Director of the Petrograd Hospital and Medical Museum. And you are no longer in Siberia. This is Petrograd —it is Sunday and those are church bells you hear."

Lambert was puzzled. "Did you say, Petrograd? Not Leningrad? Am I in the past or the future—or what? I last remember being in Oymyakon, Siberia, in—ah—nineteen-seventy-six. I'm an American, my name is Charles Lambert and I froze to death. I mean—" He suddenly broke off as he felt a sharp pain in his side. "When are you going to operate?"

She frowned. "Nineteen-seventy-six? This is two thousand sixty-eight. Nearly a hundred years. Don't you think we have had time enough to have gotten rid of your cult of Lenin? No, we didn't have a revolution. The Soviet Union has always had all the forms of democracy. All we had to do was vote out the Party. Not any easy task, I admit." She smiled again.

"This is the future, then," said Lambert. "You've made changes—good. But—that's not what I'm primarily concerned about. A hundred years—medical science must have advanced greatly. Have you found the cure for cancer?" He watched her face closely.

"Of course," she said. "We have eliminated all major diseases. Occasionally a new disease comes up and takes a few months or years to eradicate. Here at the museum we study the old diseases to make sure they do not recur. The reason you are here now is that this is one of the few places that has the facilities to care for you."

LAMBERT, now torn between hope and suspicion, again asked, "When will you operate? It's not that I can't stand it, but—

"We have already operated. Several times. The disease keeps spreading." She shook her head sadly. "We have made you as comfortable as possible. There is nothing else we can do."

Lambert leaped out of bed in alarm. He found it easy as the bed helped him. He disconnected the attachments. He found himself standing up, clad in close-fitting pajamas of soft material. He felt fit, then noticed his toes were missing, gasped, forgot what he was going to say.

Dr. Ivanova said, "We can replace your extremities easily. They were damaged in freezing."

Lambert remembered his protest. "But you can't cure my cancer?"

"I am sorry. You have only a

few weeks to live—hardly more than when we started."

"You can't cure me? Then refreeze me!"

"There are no facilities," said Dr. Ivanova.

No facilities? This was a cruel blow, one he had not expected. It was not a refusal, but a statement of fact that allowed no argument. Yet he argued.

"No facilities? Don't you do any freezing? Don't you practice cryogenics?"

"Freezing is wrong," she said flatly.. "Such an application of cryogenics is against nature, against evolution, against eugenics—"

"Against God?" Lambert asked bitterly, slumping down into a bedside chair, its deep cushions enveloping him.

She frowned. "We have freedom of religion here—we are not bigots. Atheism is acceptable." She shook her head. "No, it is reason that this form of cryogenics is against. Preserving the unfit, keeping human discards, saving obsolete diseases for posterity. Thank God you are one of the last of the trespassers. Not many are found these days."

"How did you find me?" asked Lambert, curious in spite of his despair.

"The underground city of Oymyakon expanded into your forgotten tunnel," she explained. "Luckily you were not crushed. Apparently records were lost or concealed, maps were altered and personnel scattered, so that the existence of the tunnel was not known until the mole-dozers broke through. They found some inferior fur-foxes in the cave, but no human survivors other than you."

"Were there only a few successful freezers?" he asked.

"There were millions," she said, in a voice filled with contempt. "Your century was a very selfish one. You tried to use up all natural resources, polluted the Earth irreversibly, saddled the future with your impossible debts and, not content with that, you wanted to impose on your children the care of your corrupt bodies." She modified her tone, apparently remembering that he was a sick man. "But now there are only about a hundred trespassers left undiscovered. This is not an actual count—we don't really know how many there are or where they are—it is only a computer estimate. There once was a huge number. Would you like to know what happened to them? Or would you rather not?" she asked coldly.

"I want to know," said Lambert hopelessly.

"They died, those who were not

already dead. Preserving a dead body is useless, of course. When the brain dies, who can recreate it?"

"I know that," said Lambert. "But why did the others die? Didn't the machinery function?"

"Yes, most of the time, even in early experimental efforts like yours. Later efforts were quite successful. Too much so. As I said, millions were being frozen, millions every year—before the war."

"Tell me about the war," Lambert asked.

"Which one?"

"The one that killed off the freezers."

"Oh, they all did, in one way or another," she answered. "You can imagine how. Some were damaged by neglect, constant relocation, bombs. Failure of power killed many—you were relatively safe in your permafrost. Let me tell you about an interesting incident. For a time there was a serious food shortage —you are not listening. No, it was not cannibalism on our part. There is a certain sect in India—one of the famine areas—that does not bury or burn its dead, but consumes them, so to speak. We traded—for other products of the soil."

Lambert felt sick.

Dr. Ivanova snapped, "Well, what would you have? Should the living die so that the dead may live? That is what is wrong with your whole trespasser philosophy —you seek to displace your own children. You are not fit to survive—in more ways than one." With an effort she resumed her calm history. "There was a series of wars. The final one was a war of the sciences."

"War of the sciences?"

She nodded. "Science against science. For thousands of years science has been helping both sides in wars. For hundreds of years some people have been predicting that one day science would fight its own war against its enemies. They didn't think of the logical counterpart to the long succession of previous wars. Tribe against tribe, nation against nation, religion against religion, economic philosophy against economic philosophy. They failed to predict a war between different scientific viewpoints. You may have guessed that this war included those who believed in immortality via cryogenics and those who put their faith in eugenics. It was finally settled by a breakthrough in eugenics that made human immortality not only useless but anti-progress. Freezing was forbidden and the frozen were awakened—those

who were left. Few survived this period. Feeling ran high against the trespassers."

LAMBERT, tiring, lay back in the chair, which adjusted itself to his new position. "I appreciate all this. I expected to find radical changes. What I can't understand is that you haven't a cure for cancer."

"Oh, but we have eliminated cancer."

"But you can't cure me. I don't get it. Am I a special case?"

"No, yours is an ordinary form, common in your time. We have all the past medical records here in the museum. You may be assured that we have done all that doctors in your time and some years beyond could have done —and with much less difficulty. We have better instruments and techniques. But we can't do anything to eliminate your cancer without eliminating you. We have eliminated cancer through eugenics. Don't you understand what eugenics is?"

Lambert closed his eyes, groaned. "Then I froze myself for nothing."

"That is true," she said with sympathy. "Would you like to hear about the breakthrough in eugenics?"

"Yes," he lied.

"The real purpose of eugenics is not to create a super-race but to fight degeneration. There has always been resistance to eugenics, because of humanitarian considerations. We could not breed humans like animals, because this involved destruction of the unfit or refusing them reproduction rights. The other, much greater barrier to human eugenics was in the slowness of human generations. What could be accomplished in less than ten thousand years? But if one reduced the generation's span to a half-day the same result could be obtained in a year—one ten-thousandth of the time."

Lambert was interested in spite of himself. "You mean you can speed up human growth? To a half-day? That is unbelievable."

She smiled. "Perhaps you have heard of lower sea animals that have two cycles of existence? The hydra stage of the jellyfish, for example, produces an offspring of an entirely different form, the medusa stage, which in turn breeds back to the original. That is alternation of generations. We have done this with humans—that is the breakthrough in eugenics."

"Do you breed humans in the laboratory?" he asked with distaste.

"Not humans. An alternate form we call *portans*, that is, 'carriers.' The fertilized ovum—

in an artificial environment and under certain treatment—splits, not into connected cells that develop into an adult human, but into many individual cells having a separate existence of their own. This splitting goes on until there are millions of *portans* in the medium. Then the second innovation comes into play—the artificial selection. Thousands of tests reveal latent defects in each *portan*, make an accurate prediction of what each one of these cells would develop into if allowed to grow into an adult human."

She paused to see if he was following, then: "The essence of quality control is rejection. Here it happens on a microscopic level, far from humanitarian considerations. One *portan* is selected; the other millions are destroyed. The selected *portan* is placed in another medium, allowed to develop further and is then broken up into *portans* again. And so the process goes on, a process more of purification than of evolution.

"After many generations, the final ovum is transplanted and allowed to develop normally. Between generations of normal humans, there might be a thousand microscopic generations. That is the usual desired interval for the removal of defects from any combination. Can you see now how we have eliminated cancer? By eliminating the cancer-prone strains through selection."

"I see," Lambert said glumly. He rose and the chair helped him to get up. He paced the floor shakily. The doctor turned to leave, paused by the door.

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"The best we can do for you is to make your dying fairly comfortable. You may be up and about and conscious for only a few weeks more. Until then you have a choice."

Lambert looked dully at her. "Choice?"

"We still believe in freedom of choice even for the trespasser. Come with me."

Outside the door was not a corridor but an open-air terrace used as a means of entrance. A walk led along it in both directions, and opposite the door was a low parapet. The air was balmy —it must be summer in Petrograd.

Lambert hobbled to the parapet, looked out across a magic city. No other words could describe it. It was like an air view of Disneyland, seen through a kaleidoscope. Mingled together were skyscrapers and fantastic Byzantine turrets and beyond these the Neva sparkled in the summer air. He looked down—he was near the summit of a tall building, of a height beyond estimation, the stepped terrace next beneath him a hundred feet below. It was deserted, as was the terrace he was on—he imagined the hospital was not much used these days.

From far below he again heard the sound of church bells.

Out there was a whole new world where he did not belong. He was out of place here. But it was a triumph of a sort. He was here, where he was not supposed to be—like man on the airless moon. He had straddled centuries and was one of the few surviving freezers or trespassers, as Dr. Ivanova had called them.

A record of what he had done would be kept here in the museum, to be added to man's total knowledge—and one day Dr. Ivanova's perfectly healthy humans might want to do what he had done. Not to saddle future generations with their problems and hangups, but to add to the wealth of human experience. He suddenly felt a little wealthier for being here.

The slight feeling of satisfaction was spoiled the the recurrence of pain, sharper now. The doctor had said something about a choice. He turned to ask her about it, but she was gone.

What choice? He leaned weakly on the parapet, squinted out at the sunlit city. Suddenly he looked down.

He smiled—and all at once he felt right about being here. He thought, *I'm the one who's giving you a choice—what you're giving me is what I always had . . .*

And abruptly it didn't matter what use either of them made of what each had been given. ●

UNDERBELLY

A question to ponder when you have all the time there is: what do you do with it?

GORDON EKLUND

GABRIEL SOLAR paused at the point in the trail where the land momentarily bulged like a knot on the trunk of a tree. There it was possible to see beyond the underbrush and foliage to where the village of Almada nestled like a child asleep between the cold blue blanket of the ocean and the dark wrinkled mattress of the hills. Gabriel peered carefully at the village, shading his eyes against the glare of the setting sun. But it was impossible to see more than a vague outline of misty streets and stores and houses and yards—and this was not enough. The sky was still bright, but the land was dark and he could not make out the brown adobe box of his own home. But even if he had been able to see the

house—what then? He could not see through the walls—he could not tell what she was doing now. Had she stopped crying? Was she drinking now, or sleeping, rocking, or smiling and laughing? He could not know. Turning, he continued up the trail toward the top of the hill. When he had finished at the installation he would return to his wife, to Maria, and then he would know. But not until then.

The trail was difficult here. The path swooped down abruptly and it was no longer possible to see the village. Finally the land began to rise again. Then there was a sharp right turn, and the trees and underbrush were gone and the trail had reached its end.

Years before this land had belonged to the Finca family. Gabriel was not a young man—he was nearly fifty—and he could clearly remember the first revolution twenty years ago, when the land had been taken from the last of the Fincas and divided among the various smaller landowners of Almada. These people had then moved their families here to the top of the hill, building small houses and even a general store. But now these houses were gone, too, victims of the second revolution five years ago, and now the land belonged to nobody. It belonged to the government and to the foreigners who were the friends of the government. They had constructed the installation here at the top of the hill three years ago.

None of this had ever affected Gabriel, until the day when Dr. Berg had come to Perez's cantina and given Gabriel the job. The house Gabriel lived in with his wife Maria and her son Juan was also the house where his father had lived before him and, as a fisherman, he was not a member of any of the various political factions. Until six months ago he had never in his life stood here at the end of the trail at the summit of the hill.

The installation was a huge squat concrete structure, as unassailable in appearance as a Spanish fortress. Gabriel was the only villager who had even been inside its walls. Most of the men who worked there were foreigners like Dr. Berg and Dr. Goddard, and those who were not foreign were the men from the north who served as janitors and cooks and sometimes as special policemen. They were as alien to Gabriel as Dr. Berg, who spoke a language he did not understand. Gabriel did not know why men were brought from as far away as a thousand miles to work at jobs that any villager could just as easily have performed, but neither could he understand why Dr. Berg had given him the job.

DR. BERG had come to Perez's cantina one afternoon. A tall gaunt man with very thick black eyebrows and a slick white coat loosely buttoned across his chest, he had asked Perez, "Who is the most trustworthy man you know?"

Perez had not been given a chance to answer.

Gabriel, who had not had a good day in his boat and who was a little drunk, had replied instead, "I am the most trustworthy man in this whole village."

"Good." Dr. Berg had turned upon him and Gabriel had been very frightened by this strange-looking man. "Then report to the installation tomorrow morning at eight o'clock and ask for Dr. Berg. I have a job for you."

"Are you certain?" Gabriel had asked.

"Of course. The pay is quite decent—don't worry about that. As long as you are trustworthy."

"I am."

"Your name, please."

"Gabriel Solar," he had said, stammering. Then ashamed of showing his fear before this powerful-looking foreigner, he had stood very erect and looked directly into the man's eyes.

"I shall be expecting you," Dr. Berg had said.

That had been six months ago and each day since then (including Sundays) Gabriel had followed the twisting path up the face of the hill to the installation gate. He left his house every morning at precisely seven-thirty and he returned at six o'clock. Occasionally Dr. Berg would ask him to come back to the installation later in the evening and today was one of those days.

It was now nearly eight o'clock and the last faint rays of the declining sun pecked at the back of Gabriel's neck as he approached the guards' booth, which stood beside the gate.

The guard knew him. He was a foreigner decked out in a shiny blue uniform with three horizontal silver stripes and a white hat with a polished bill. He nodded at Gabriel, went into his booth and touched the button that caused the gate to rise briefly into the air. Gabriel stepped past the open gate and into the installation. This was the only entrance through the high wire fence that circled the installation like a tarnished necklace. Sharp bristling barbs of wire were evenly spaced along the uppermost strand of the fence.

Three weeks ago a young girl picnicking nearby with her family had climbed a tree and placed the palm of her hand against the barbed wire. She had screamed and fallen out of the tree. The grass was

soft and she had landed on her feet, but her hand had been burned.

Gabriel understood why this had occurred—there was heat electricity, running through the wire. Dr. Berg had told him, but Dr. Berg had also warned him that to discuss anything at all about the installation in the village would be as great a dishonor as the sin of a priest who reveals the details of a man's confession. Gabriel had accepted this, but he did not like the little girl's being hurt and he felt guilty.

Once he was inside the installation, Gabriel went immediately to Dr. Berg's office. It was located in a small building set apart from the main structure. The office was small, cluttered and furnished with a bare iron cot and two long wooden benches heaped with instruments and tools. Several large wire cages were on a shelf that ran the length of one wall. These cages were presently empty except for one in which a long rat scampered and ran, occasionally flopping over on his back and kicking his legs high in the air. Gabriel had never seen a rat acting so before.

Dr. Berg was alone. He stood beside one of the wooden benches and, hearing Gabriel enter the room, said, "We'll have to wait for Dr. Goddard."

"Yes," Gabriel said.

HE CROSSED the room to the cage where the rat was penned and poked a finger through the wires. The rat stopped his running and came to investigate, sniffing at Gabriel's finger, then nibbling.

Gabriel was not afraid that the rat would try to bite him. They were good friends. The rat was named Poppa.

"Hungry, Poppa? Smell the food on my finger? Playing so hard makes you very hungry."

"Gabriel," said Dr. Berg.

"Yes?" He removed his finger from the cage and turned his back on the rat.

"What's this I hear about Jenkins? Is it true?"

Gabriel was not surprised that Dr. Berg knew. He always seemed to know everything about anything. So why not this as well?

"Yes," he said.

"And your son?"

"Maria's son. By Joseph, who drowned in the storm."

"I see." Dr. Berg crossed the room, opened the door and peered out at the darkness beyond. Then he came back and looked at his watch. "I'm afraid they'll catch Maria's son. These hills—there's no place he can hide for long."

"No," Gabriel said. "He did a foolish thing."

"Do you know why?"

Gabriel shrugged. He placed his

hands together in front of his waist and looked down at the clasped fingers. "Because he was afraid of me." He knew he could never lie to Dr. Berg. "He hated me."

"And your wife?"

"She feels the same way."

"And you can't think of anything to tell her?"

"No."

Dr. Berg sighed deeply. "Neither can I." There had been no force behind his questions, no interest or curiosity. He had seemed to be asking them because after he had begun he had seen no way to stop.

"It's a miracle Dr. Goddard hasn't heard," he said. "Damn him."

Gabriel went over to one of the wooden benches where there was a bare space and sat down. He sat so that he could watch Poppa as the rat played in his cage.

He began to think about his trouble.

It had not begun with the boy, but that had been the worst. Not the boy who was his wife's son, but the other boy, Manuel, whose mother he did not know. Gabriel had been bringing in his boat after an afternoon's fishing on a day when Dr. Berg had sent him home early.

The whole happening came back to him as if it were now—as if he had not lived since that day.

HE STILL liked to fish and went out whenever he could. He knew his work with Dr. Berg would not last forever and eventually he would have to return to the sea. He had not done well this day and he was angry at himself. As he was pulling the boat ashore he heard the cries coming from farther down the beach and knew instantly what they meant. He had heard such cries before in his life and twice he had seen the bloated rotting bodies that were washed ashore afterward by the strong currents.

This time he ran toward the sounds and then he was there—and was not. He did not feel the freezing waters covering his body until his head was fully submerged and he was swimming toward the shattered light of the sun. The boy had strayed far from shore. Gabriel poked his head above the water, looked and saw the hands clawing at the air as if to grasp and hold it. Then the hands were gone and when Gabriel reached that place the boy, too, was gone.

Gabriel dived. Once and again. The second time he stayed down a long time, dropping all the way to the bottom, feeling the coldness there like a numbing heat, like sunburn, and then he saw the boy. Manuel. Whose name had been cried on the shore. He was lying on the bottom, his hands raised toward

the distant surface, his black hair streaming above his head like strands of ocean algae. His eyes were open and as Gabriel drew near he saw that Manuel's mouth was open as well. He took the boy underneath the arms and climbed slowly toward the surface. Then he was paddling toward shore, towing Manuel, keeping the boy's head above the level of the waves.

The boy was not breathing. The people on the beach—and many had been drawn to the spot by the mother's cries—backed away. He stretched the boy out on the sand and stood over him. An old woman, her face nearly hidden by a tattered shawl, came close and screamed a word in his face. He lifted his head and looked at the people, seeing the face of his wife's son among them. The people stared fearlessly back at him, but not a one of them moved.

"Breathe into him," Gabriel said. "Somebody must breathe into him."

"*Nacho*," said the old woman, who had stepped back into the crowd. "*Nacho*!" she screamed.

The boy's mother ran forward. "Do not touch him. You are death. You have killed my son." Dropping to her knees, her dress already stained by the wet sand, she pulled her son tightly to her bosom. Seawater spurted from between the boy's open lips, splashing his mother's throat. She caressed his hair and face.

She said much more to Gabriel, muttering, murmuring, suddenly shouting. Gabriel did not know what to do. He simply stood there beside the water, oblivious to the woman, to all of them except Juan, Maria's son, but Juan said nothing. He stared back at his mother's husband and his lips moved. But if any sound came from between them it was lost beneath the crash of the surf and the screams of the mother.

Gabriel knew what it was. The final time he had gone down after the boy he had stayed underwater for fifteen minutes. Standing on the beach, looking at Juan, he remembered how his breath had grown shorter and shorter and his chest become filled with pain. He had kept going, desperately searching the bottom—and then the pain had gone. He had felt fine and he had continued to search, not breathing after that, not needing to breathe. And when he had cracked the surface and seen the glowing light of day he had taken one breath—a small one. He had not needed more.

Fifteen minutes. For a quarter of an hour he had lived without air.

"AM I late?"

Dr. Goddard was an awkward man whose white coat barely

concealed the immensity of his belly. He had entered the room while Gabriel had been thinking and now he had gone to the cage, opened it, caught and removed the rat.

He held Poppa cautiously in his hands.

Dr. Berg came over to him. "I assume you were busy?"

"Administration," said Dr. Goddard. "Couldn't get away." He jerked his head at Gabriel. "Does he have to be here?"

"I want him." said Dr. Berg.

"For your sake I hope he's too stupid to understand what he sees."

"It doesn't matter," Dr. Berg said. "Gabriel can be trusted."

"No one can be trusted too far." Dr. Goddard pressed Poppa against his chest. "Gabriel—get us the icepick."

Gabriel glanced up at Dr. Berg, who nodded slightly. Gabriel stood up, went to the other bench and found the icepick hidden beneath a wad of used paper towels and a torn chart that contained numbers and letters neatly arranged in a series of boxes. Dr. Goddard was having trouble with Poppa and he shouted at Gabriel to hurry. Crossing the room, Gabriel held the pick cautiously in one hand as though it were alive and might turn suddenly and try to bite him. The top of the pick was bright and clean. The handle was made of dark hardwood.

Gabriel handed the pick to Dr. Goddard.

"Good," said Dr. Goddard, puffing as though suddenly exhausted. "Now take this damn thing before it bites me."

Gabriel took Poppa carefully from the doctor and the rat stopped squirming, relaxed and lay still. Gabriel whispered, "Ah Poppa, ah baby, it is fine—everything is fine." He stroked the top of the rat's head with the tip of his thumb, smoothing back the soft fur. Closing its eyes, the rat pretended to sleep. The head and forepaws extended beyond Gabriel's hands while the tail dangled loosely.

"I suppose there's no reason to wait," said Dr. Goddard.

"It's been forty'five minutes since the injection. I expected you sooner." Dr. Berg's hands were deep inside his trouser pockets. He rocked evenly on the balls of his feet. His bearing was firm and relaxed, like that of a young priest confident of his faith. "Proceed. This part of the experiment is all yours."

"Of course," said Goddard, who gripped the icepick in his right hand, holding it in the palm of his hand while holding the base of the blade between thumb and forefinger.

At a signal from Dr. Berg, Gabriel raised the rat so that its head

was even with the tip of the pick.

Goddard thrust the pick into the rat's left eye. Poppa was silent but his whole body suddenly twitched from the whiskers to the tail. Goddard withdrew the pick. A trickle of blood oozed from the open socket of the eye. The blood flowed slowly down the rat's narrow face, painting the snout and whiskers. It was followed by a sudden rush of thick gray matter.

"Put it back," said Dr. Goddard. He tossed the pick at the nearest bench, but missed. The pick clattered to the concrete floor.

"Shouldn't be long," Dr. Berg said.

"No," said Goddard. "Ten minutes. Fifteen." Puffing like a frightened dog, he hurried to the door and opened it. Sticking his head outside, he gasped for air. Dr. Berg turned his eyes toward the floor.

Waiting silently beside the rat's cage, the three men resembled mourners at a furneral. They watched the rat's body attentively, as if they expected it to move. After ten minutes it did move. A rear leg began to quiver. The puncture wound in the eye socket had closed. The dry caked blood around the eye made observation difficult, but Gabriel was certain that Poppa was watching him from behind the blood.

Dr. Goddard pressed his face tightly against the cage. His chin and lips were shiny with perspiration. Dr. Berg rocked on his feet, saying nothing.

"It's working," Goddard said. "The beast is alive."

"Wait," said Dr. Berg.

Another minute passed while the men waited. The rat began to move, its tail slapping the bottom of the cage, stirring the dust. One whisker briefly shook like a leaf brushed by the wind. Then the rat rolled to its feet and stood. It walked steadily to its water dish and, leaning over, drank.

"Well," Dr. Goddard said. His face was wet and his hands shook as he lifted them to his face. "I can't believe—"

"You ought to have more faith in your work," Dr. Berg said.

AFTER cleaning its face of the blood, working relentlessly with moistened paws, the rat went to its nest, a pile of sawdust and torn cloth in a far corner of the cage, and curled up to sleep, burying its head deep in the folds of the nest. The three men walked away to stand near the door. Both Doctors had removed their lab coats. Dr. Goddard placed a hand on the doorknob.

"We will resume the injections tomorrow morning," he said. "At the usual intervals. I have been con-

sidering. Perhaps next time we will use poison. What do you think, Alfred?"

"That would be fine," Dr. Berg said evenly.

"Good, good—poison it will be, then." Goddard had regained his usual composure. His hands and face were dry but pale. He said, "I must say you surprise me, Alfred. What's happened to you? I can't help wondering. Why no more demands that we press forward? Why no more urging that we skip the preliminary experiments? Have you finally come to accept my methods?"

"Yes," Dr. Berg said. "I have."

"Well, that's good. You realize that our work is the most important in the entire history of the human race. We don't dare hurry matters and risk possible failure. Now we have this animal and that is fine. Perhaps he will live forever. Perhaps not. At the moment it looks very good."

"Yes," Dr. Berg said. "It does look very promising."

Goddard was grinning, his teeth glistening brightly. "Let me tell you, Alfred. In six months, nine months, who knows? Surely in not more than a year we will find ourselves a man who wishes to assist us in our work. Perhaps a convict. One who has been sentenced to die. In return we will get his government to commute his sentence to life imprisonment. In the event that our experiments are successful, of course."

"Of course," Dr. Berg said. "That would be most ironic."

Dr. Goddard suddenly shook his head, as though recalling a detail of some significance. Gradually and smile faded from his lips.

He asked, "Is something wrong, Alfred? I don't understand you. The way you act one might think we had failed."

"No," Dr. Berg said. "I'm simply tired. You'll have to forgive me, Herman."

"Oh, I do, I do." Goddard was grinning again. "I fully understand. Good night, Alfred."

"Good night."

Then Dr. Berg and Gabriel were alone in the room.. Except for Poppa. But Poppa was sleeping.

"The fat bastard," said Dr. Berg.

He was not referring to Poppa, Gabriel knew.

GABRIEL sat on the end of the bench, his white work shirt unfastened and bunched loosely at his waist. He stared down at his sandaled feet, nothing the clogged dirt that lay thick beneath his neatly trimmed toenails.

"He doesn't know," Dr. Berg

said. "If he paid any attention to anyone besides himself I'm sure he would have guessed by now. He would have heard about you."

"And Juan?"

"About Juan, too," Dr. Berg said. He paused for a moment and scratched his cheeks. He shaved not more than once every four days and today was not one of those days. "Nothing else has happened?" he asked "You haven't been involved in another accident?"

"No," Gabriel said. Such involvements had happened twice before and he had told Dr. Berg both times, because at that time he had not yet fully understood what he had become. The first time he had been rummaging through a box of old clothes, his hands buried deeply in the moldy garmets, when he had felt a sharp stinging sensation at the tip of one finger. He had jerked out his hands and flipped the box to the floor, spilling its contents. With a stick he had dug through the garmets until the scorpion lay revealed. He killed the beast with the stick.

Maria had been with him at the time. Juan had been away, fishing, and he had not seen that the swelling never came. Maria had said that it was good fortune, that Gabriel must have been mistaken about the sting, but he had seen in her eyes that she had not believed her own words.

"No more cuts or scrapes or bruises?" asked Dr. Berg.

"None," Gabriel said.

The cut had occurred a week after the scorpion sting. Juan had been home this time and Gabriel and the boy had been seated at the Wooden table in the main room, listening to Maria preparing cornbread in the kitchen. Gabriel had been playing with a knife, flipping it into the air and catching it by the hilt. Sometimes he would let it turn only once, then reach out and catch it. At other times he would allow it to go around twice, then grab it near the tabletop. It was only a small pocketknife with two blades a few inches long, one at each end, but it was the knife Gabriel used in his boat and he kept it very sharp.

"*No.*"

Juan had seen. Listening to Maria, his mind far away, Gabriel had lost the rhythm of the knife. He had grabbed it by the blade and it had sliced easily through his palm.

He had screamed, dropping the knife. Maria had run in, her face white. Gabriel had displayed his hand. The cut had shown long and white, the skin lying in folds around the wound. But there had been

no blood. Not a solitary drop.

Maria had uttered a word of her people: "*Nacho.*" Witch.

"You feel fine?" Dr. Berg asked.

"Yes," Gabriel said.

"But something is bothering you. I can tell. Is it your son?"

"Maria's son," Gabriel said.

"Do you know why he killed Jenkins?" This time there was concern in Dr. Berg's voice, but it was not concern for the boy or for Gabriel either. For whom? For what?

"Because of you," Gabriel said. "Because he knew I came here and he thought it was you who had turned me into a thing that does not need to breathe air. Or is stung by a scorpion without harm. Or can be cut by a knife and does not bleed. He would have killed you, Dr. Berg, but he did not know one of you from the other, so when he saw this other man—Jenkins—coming away from the cantina he caught him and he killed him."

"But he has been in trouble before, hasn't he?" Dr. Berg seemed to know everything, so Gabriel was not surprised. A man who could make another into what Gabriel had become—what was the difference between this man and a god?

"Yes, he has often been in trouble before. Ever since I can remember. The police—yes."

"And he did take Dr. Jenkins' money?"

"That was because he was afraid. He wanted to leave. To run away."

"Then what makes you think this has anything to do with you, Gabriel? How do you know the boy did not simply kill and rob because he wanted to kill and rob? It was his nature. There are few men in your village worth robbing. Dr. Jenkins should not have gone there. He had been warned."

"But you came—to find me—at Perez's cantina."

"I can handle myself, Gabriel. And I seldom drink."

THERE was no point to this. Gabriel raised his hands and sighed. Dr. Berg would never understand about Juan, because it was not the boy who truly mattered. It was the mother. Maria was an Indian and she held many of the old superstitions—learned from her mother—as truths. Gabriel could not forget the look on her face when he had come back from the beach that day—when Manuel had drowned—his clothes soaked and clinging to his body like skin. Her eyes had been wide as saucers and her mouth had hung open, the teeth exposed. Someone had been there ahead of him and told her, and she was now desperately afraid of him.

Tonight, after the police had come looking for Juan, it had even been worse. Maria had cried. He had never known her to cry this way before. It had not been the grief in her tears that had frightened him—for her son was dead and she knew it—it had been her own fear.

"I must go back to the installation," he had said.

And when he had left he had stood outside the door and listened and had heard her voice change. She had continued to cry for her son, but her fear had vanished.

"Roll up your sleeve, Gabriel. We ought to get this done so we can get you home."

"Yes, Dr. Berg."

Gabriel rolled his sleeve steadily up his arm until the bulk of his shoulder lay exposed. His fingers added further dirt to the already soiled fabric of the shirt. The skin beneath was pale white. Before, in the days when he had not yet come to work for Dr. Berg, when he had gone with the boats all summer, his skin had gotten to be as dark as Maria's. But now he had little time to spend in the sun and he was as pale and white as a sheet.

Dr. Berg returned with the needle. Gabriel did not turn away or flinch when Dr. Berg inserted the point of the needle beneath the skin of his bicep. A pale pink fluid entered his veins. At first Gabriel had not liked the needle, but after six months it no longer frightened him.

"There," said Dr. Berg, patting the tiny wound with a wad of cotton. "That will be the end of it."

"That is all?" Gabriel said.

"That is all. I think we could have stopped a month ago. I'm sure of it. With the animals, the rat, the effect has never left. In that regard Dr. Goddard has been most helpful."

"There will be no more shots?"

"No. Unless something unexpected occurs. But you must continue to come here every day. You must not act as though anything abnormal has occurred. We do not want Dr. Goddard to suspect, do we?"

"No."

"Fine. Splendid." Dr. Berg's teeth showed like the claws of a hawk. "But you must remember to tell me everything."

Gabriel said that he understood. Getting to his feet, he nodded to the doctor and then went silently and swiftly to the door. He had forgotten to roll down his sleeve and the cloth rode high against the ghostly pale flesh of his shoulder. Dr. Berg said nothing as Gabriel went out.

THE dirt path twisted jaggedly down the hill, splitting the high brown grass of summer into separate worlds. In darkness now, Gabriel stepped cautiously down the path, for it was seldom used and many thick vines lay draped across it. There was no light here, except for that afforded by the moon and stars.

A wind came running down from the hills above. Brisk and cool, it grazed the bare flesh of his neck, whipped his hair and made him feel clean and alive. On the outside. Inside he wanted only to hurry, to run with the wind, for he would not feel secure until he reached home. But he was afraid to run. He did not want to risk tripping and perhaps cutting himself and seeing the open wound in the moonlight—the wound that would not bleed.

When he had come tonight he had intended to tell Dr. Berg that he wanted to quit. But he had guessed even before Dr. Berg had told him that it had been too late and the words had refused to pass his lips. Now it was over—Dr. Berg had said so—and he could no longer even tell Maria that he had quit.

Had they caught Juan yet? He knew that they would, for Dr. Berg had been right—there was no place to hide in these hills. Juan would have to go into a village and the police would be waiting there for him. Would he even have a chance to spend the money he had stolen? Gabriel hoped that he would. It would seem more fair that way.

And who had been right? Dr. Berg or himself? Why had Juan killed the man, Dr. Jenkins? Because of what the installation done to Gabriel—or merely because he wanted money and the freedom money could bring? Gabriel thought he knew the answer, but many times in the past he had thought he had known the answer to other questions and often he had been wrong.

When he reached the first houses of the village he began to hurry, stepping quickly through the barren dusty streets. The houses at the edge of the village were shacks made of thin wood—they banged and clattered loudly as the wind whipped the boards against each other. This was the worst part of the village. Gabriel's home was not far from here, but it was not of this section. He had always been proud of this fact. He was a fisherman, as had been his father before him. Two summers ago, when there had not been enough fish, he had been so ashamed that he had stayed away from home for days at a time. It had

been a similar time—a slow time, though not so harsh—when Dr. Berg had found him.

I am the most trustworthy man in the village. . .

Why had he said it? Because it was true?

Perhaps it was true—but why had he said it? It was not like him to boast so openly of his virtues.

A POLICEMAN stood in front of Gabriel's home. Light came through the open door, providing a background for the man, making him a shadow.

"No—Gabriel—no." The policeman put his hands against Gabriel's chest and held him away from the door. He could hear people moving and talking inside the house.

"Juan?" he asked.

"No." The policeman pushed him farther back. Gabriel knew this man. His name was Diego and as children they had gone together to the sea with Gabriel's father. But Diego had been too clumsy to make a good fisherman.

"Maria?" Gabriel asked.

"Is that him? Is that the man, Diego?"

This was a voice from inside. It sounded unduly harsh in the stillness of the night.

"Send him in. Don't stop him. Let him come ahead. He will have to know."

She was in the bedroom. There were three rooms in the house. The main room was filled with men, many of them uniformed policeman. The kitchen was empty. Gabriel passed through both in order to reach the bedroom. Maria lay on the bed. A blanket covered her.

Gabriel knew the man who sat on the edge of the bed. It was the doctor.

"Please," Gabriel said. "Let me see her."

The doctor shrugged and drew back the blanket.

Gabriel looked at Maria. Her hands, crossed on her chest, were very white. Her neck and face were a sea of dark red. The knife lay on the table beside the bed. There was a puddle of dark red on the floor below the table. Her face was expressionless.

Maria clutched a crucifix. Gabriel noticed the way the dull medallion glimmered in the dim light, as though it possessed an illumination of its own.

Then the doctor drew the blanket back over her head.

"She didn't leave a note," he said.

Gabriel shook his head and turned to leave.

"Well," said the doctor. "Can't you say? Why did she do it?"

Gabriel could not say.

HE CROSSED toward the main business section of the village, a single street three blocks long of battered stores and small markets. The street smelled powerfully and constantly of rotting fish.

The cantina squatted on a corner. The hour was late but the place never closed until the last customer had gone home.

Gabriel walked across the wooden sidewalk and through the open door. Perez's brother-in-law, Chalo, was working behind the bar. Gabriel told him that he wanted a beer.

Reaching a big hand into the freezer below the bar, Chalo removed a bottle of beer. The tinted brown glass of the bottle sparkled with tiny clinging particles of ice. Chalo opened the bottle and poured the contents carefully into a glass mug, tipping the mug slightly so that the foam would not spill.

"So you are working late again tonight?"

"Yes," Gabriel said.

"And for this they pay you extra money."

The mug was full. Taking it, Gabriel lapped at the foam. "Sometimes."

"But you're not ill."

"No," Gabriel said, lifting the mug from the bar. Turning, eyes darting, he searched for a suitable table.

"But you look very pale," Chalo said. "Has Juan been captured?"

Gabriel found a good place to sit. It was the last table on the floor and he squeezed between it and the wall, setting his beer down first. Then he drank. The top of the table was deeply scarred with various names and phrases, most in Spanish, a few in English. There were also many dates without much meaning. Again Gabriel drank.

Two people were seated at opposite ends of the bar. Both were gazing straight ahead into the mirror. One was either an American or an Englishman. He was drinking whisky and he was too old and shabbily dressed to be a tourist. His white hair was sprinkled across his head in moist clumps like melting snow. The other was merely an old woman, done for the night. She looked very tired. Gabriel had seen her many times before but he could not remember her name.

He could not remember anything right now. Raising the mug to his lips, he drained most of the beer, then placed what was left at the center of the table. He fixed his hands one on each side of the mug.

Then he began to pray.

He prayed first to the Son and then to the Father. Then he prayed to both. He said, *Our Father Who Art in Heaven. . .* and so on. He told the Father that his fear was not that of any man who had lived before. Even the Son had been allowed to die so that he might live again. He said that he knew that suicide was a sin of mortal consequence, but that the choice of accomplishing this act was no longer his to make.

He asked simply for death. For release. For death to fulfill Christ's promise that he might live again. He was positive that God was hearing him now. Hadn't Dr. Goddard said that installation's work was the most important in the entire history of the human race? And wasn't he, Gabriel, still a man?

He opened his mind and let God see what he now saw in all his moments of waking dreaming sleeping working walking crying. He showed the funnel to God, stretching endlessly ahead and behind, turning, spinning, shirling, ever the same, black and eternally swirling Gabriel and this smell of fish and these men, the doctors. . .

The same and the same and the same. The eternal infinite sameness.

His lips moved, mumbling. Then he stopped and closed his eyes, waiting.

Nothing happened.

His breath swept sweet, pure, fish-smelling air into his lungs. His throat was moist. The taste of beer lay mildly bitter on his lips and tongue. His nostrils were clean and dry.

Oh, Christ kill me . . .

Nothing happened.

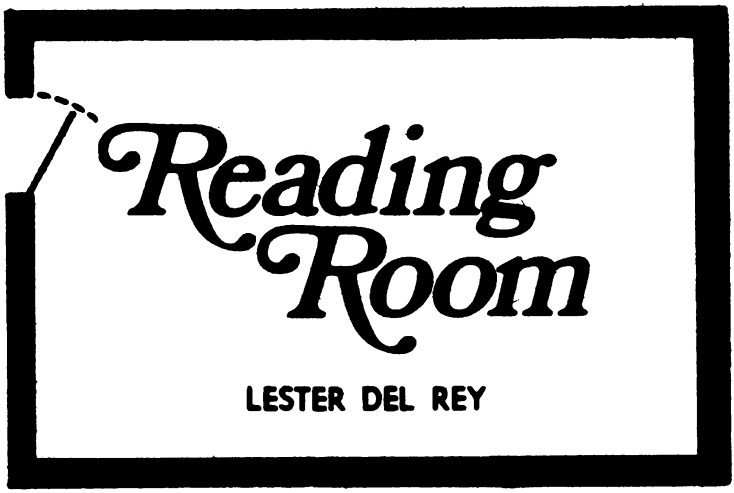
He grabbed the mug by the handle and cracked it over the table, broken glass spilling, falling. He raised the jagged edge of the cracked mug, glass sharp as a razor, placed it against his throat, held it there, waiting, feeling death near, sensing its material presence.

Chaol came around the bar, frightened. The old woman turned, disinterested. The Anglo did nothing.

"I cannot die," Gabriel said softly.

Juan and Maria, Maria and Juan, together, inseparable in death. And he alone was alone.

He dropped the glass and stepped senselessly over it, pushing the table away. He walked out to the empty swirling street, endless street, the same street, the street that would never change, could never kill. Gabriel went home and Maria was gone and nothing happened. ●



LESTER DEL REY

SOMETIMES I wonder what has happened to our perspective. We used to smile at the old fan motto SFIAWOL—Science Fiction Is a Way of Life. Except for a few way-out characters, we all knew that the concept was an overstatement. Science fiction was primarily a hobby, even to the professionals. It may have been the best hobby in the world and it may have paid off for a few writers, but we were in it for the fun.

Lately, it seems, all that has changed. We're a blooming bunch of serious artists and science fiction is relevant. It doesn't have to be fun, or good, or even interesting—just relevant and significant. Its purpose is to break taboos (which were broken twenty years before in the mainstream) and to provide an outlet for experimental writing (which was all done in the mainstream forty years ago.) Science fiction is like, serious, man!

Fortunately there are still a few writers who seem to enjoy playing with their concepts and having fun. They take time out to live in the worlds they create and to try to make things hang together below the surface, where nobody usually looks. Like any good hobbyist they are more concerned with how the gadget is built than with whether it will pass casual inspection. Every piece is made to the same scale and everything works. They have fun with the creation of a story, and try to make sure the readers will sense the elements of pleasure that went into it.

Harry Harrison's novel *Tunnel Through the Deeps* (Putnam, $5.95) is a good example of this.

Nobody who took himself too seriously would have written the book in the first place and no writer who had lost the sense of fun in playing with all aspects of an idea could have made such an idea a pleasure to read, as Harrison has.

The basic plot is about as simple as possible. In a world where George Washington was executed after losing the war against the British, his 1972 descendant takes on the job of building a transatlantic tunnel, hoping to improve the chances of the American Colonies' gaining Commonwealth status. There's a bit of character conflict, a fillip of love interest and some spy menace to fill out the story. But there's nothing that should be particularly new or exciting.

The freshness obviously must come from the fact that Harrison has used some sort of cross-time vehicle to get into this alternate present of his. After reading the novel carefully I can only guess that he must have spent the last few years living there and absorbing the attitudes of the world. Surely this book was not written by a man who inhabits our space-time frame.

Somewhen between 1890 and 1972 our real present accelerated its rate of change and sloughed off most of the established attitudes that our grandfathers had developed. Our literature shows this, particularly our more "pulpy" fiction. The eternal verities of literature have been turned upside down and the heroines who used to blush now rush into bed. But there has been a lag in such changes in the alternate present. Here women are still virtuous and Love is Important. Men are clearly men, filled with the joy of honest work, happy to be what they are. Honor exists and is taken for granted.

What Harrison has obviously done is to give us a story written for that alternate present. And it is so well done that I can't point to any specific instance as illustrative, because the entire book is an illustration of different attitudes in a different world. This story would be accepted without any surprise in that world. It might even be a piece of science fiction written in their 1942 about their 1972.

The technology is also different from ours. Oh, the people have atomic power, of course, but they also have the inconsistencies that always show up in a real technology —but not the same inconsistencies that are found in our present.

Reading Harrison's book I found myself nostalgic for 1972—the alternate 1972, that is. The world presented is a real—and generally a very good—one. It's nice to know that if anything goes as wrong where we live—as it may—there

will still be the alternate present to carry on. Because, of course, Harrison's is a real world—perhaps more real than ours—as must be obvious to anyone who reads the book.

FOR an example of what can be done by a man who really knows how to ride a hobby we can turn to Philip José Farmer, whose *Tarzan Alive* (Doubleday, $5.95) is like no other book ever created. Farmer has opened a wholly new field of research—one where the absence of data forms no obstacle to the diligent searcher.

I've always considered Farmer to be the ultimate hobbyist of our field and have usually found myself thoroughly delighted by the results of his steadfast pursuit of his numerous interests. But here is the first example of what he can do when he throws off all normal limitations and gives himself up all the way, in every way, to the completion of his appointed zwounds.

In brief, it is his discovery that the man whom the world knows as John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, (or more familiarly, Tarzan of the Apes), is very much alive. While the possibility was mentioned by Clayton's former biographer and popularizer, nobody but Farmer seems to have accepted the hints in *Tarzan and the Foreign Legion* as the simple facts they must now be recognized to be. Farmer has followed these and other clues to the discovery of the true identity of the man, after which he was able to obtain a brief but illuminating interview with Clayton. Following this, of course, there could no longer be any doubt of the reality of the human being so thinly disguised in the accounts of E. R. Burroughs.

For a normal researcher pursuing routine studies, discovering the simple truth might have been enough. But as a true hobbyist Farmer was unable to rest upon such scant laurels. He pursued his researches into the true life of Clayton and was able to straighten out the tangled web of confusion Burroughs had introduced to conceal certain facts. He found, for instance, that the confusing matter of Tarzan's having a grown son after only a few years of marriage was the result of confusion involving the real son and the boy adopted by the Claytons.

A whole section of the book attempts—with obvious success—to untangle the fictional confusion from the facts. A few puzzling questions remain, of course, as Farmer admits. But in general I find my own theories in some cases to be confirmed, so I can naturally attest to the accuracy of Farmer's penetrating analysis.

But the value of the book goes far

beyond providing an accurate biography of Clayton. The so-called apeman was, after all, only one of a seeming horde of superior characters whose lives deeply affected the pleasure and education of the generation or more of readers. Farmer has discovered the link that unites the "Clayton" family with such famous names as Drummond, Holmes and Wentworth. I am particularly indebted for the information given on the life of Richard Wentworth, since many aspects of his distinguished career have long baffled me and no other researcher has done any serious study of this important part of our history.

Though distinguished by a liveliness of tone and occasional flashes of welcome humor, this volume is a completely scholarly work. Addenda are provided for those who wish to examine Farmer's evidence in more detail. There is a chronology, a bibliography and a most welcome and complete index. For those who have difficulty in keeping the textual matter in clear perspective, there is also a simplified geneological chart.

I trust that copies of this book will survive for at least several hundred years. I like to think of the delight of some future scholar who may come upon this unique work and whose life may be enlarged by the rich treasure within. The effects upon posterity should exceed those the book may have upon its current readers.

And to anyone who ever enjoyed the fictional exploits of Tarzan all I can say is: Don't be put off by anything in this review—the book is a lovely one indeed and pure joy to read!

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM has founded his own line of books, known logically as DAW Books. He plans to issue four volumes a month, all science fiction. That's a large program, but his long experience at Ace makes the venture far more reasonable than it first seems. The first books are all attractive, with far better than average cover art. All are currently priced at 95¢ each.

Joseph Green's *The Mind Behind The Eye* involves giant aliens, deliberately created human superman mutants and something of the Trojan horse bit. The superman we follow winds up inside the head of a living but nonsentient giant alien where he is plagued by fear of infertility and by the reaction of a fellow worker—all while trying to make the giant react normally within the giant society.

Some of the book is fascinating reading, but too many ideas run rampant in it. Green has used the

old kitchen-sink recipe—everything goes in, including the sink. The reader is bombarded with too many ideas without being given enough time to fit in any of them properly. And the end of the grand confusion requires a bit too much coincidence to be convincing.

The Day Star, by Mark S. Geston is either a simple piece of fantasy or science fiction—I don't know where to put it. The end of the city-builder evolution has tried to impose an end to chaos on some hauntingly alien cosmos—and chaos has struck back, making all the history of that cosmos a barren waste, except for dull cities here and there.

Men from the last of the legendary cities sail through time and space to recover the wondrous material that almost trapped chaos. A boy from an early age sets out with a ghostly "grandfather" to seek his way to the fabled city. The novel is the account of the trip and its quiet aftermath.

I haven't liked Geston's previous stories. But this one has a strange compulsion. Treatment and incident are beautifully adjusted to the story. It is sort of a dream sequence, with the language and poetry of dreams superimposed. I enjoyed the tale and also the curious afterglow it left. The book not only has a cover by George Barr, incidentally, but several excellent inside illustrations. I'm old-fashioned enough to like good illustrations in a book.

One of the worst titles I've come across yet is *The Tar-Aiym Krang*, by Alan Dean Foster (Ballantine, 95¢). With that staring me in the face, I kept passing over the book whenever I searched for one to read. But you can't judge a book by either the cover or the title, it seems.

The novel begins with a beggar boy on a trading world. He becomes involved with a bunch of big-time traders and researchers, who are looking for the last, lost and greatest artifact of a great pre-human race. The artifact turns out to be still operable—or would be, if anyone could communicate with it. And perhaps you can guess the rest.

No element in the story is very original. Yet each is well done and the whole adds up to a good adventure, with quite a bit of richness of texture, interesting handling of characters and their inter-relationships. Recommended.

For those who like adventure with an excellent problem and a bit of far-out science, Jack Williamson's *Seetee Ship* and *Seetee Shock* have been issued together in a single volume by Lancer Books, at $1.25.

(Please turn to page 174)

THE BOOK OF RACK THE HEALER

(Conclusion)

ZACH HUGHES

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

The planet was inimical to life, yet under its noxious skies lived RACK THE HEALER, humanoid, powerful, endlessly exploring his world's most elusive offering—survival. A young adult male, RACK formed a liaison with BEAUTIFUL WINGS THE POWER GIVER, fertile female who assisted him following his hunt for knowledge in the "valley of warm waters," where RACK unearthed an artifact from the planet's past that might hold the key to its future. Legends told of OLD ONES who occupied the planet in its youth, built great cities—what had been their secret?

RACK'S strong body could heal itself at the cellular level of injuries and ward off the radioactive toxicity of the planet. His great lungs could extract individual particles of air from the poisonous atmosphere and store them for indefinite periods. But he had to be rescued on his homeward journey by BEAUTIFUL WINGS, whose body chemistry enabled her to utilize the planet's magnetic field to counteract its gravity for wingless flight.

She flew RACK home. Their meeting led to their mating—and to the startling discovery that RACK could extend his healing powers to her and share his air and energies with her. This development became vitally important when he was sentenced to death for having illegally dug in the soil of the warm-water valley for his precious artifact.

His judge was RED EARTH THE FAR SEER, whose sightless senses could reach the farthest stars and whose mind held all wisdom. Fueled by RACK'S energies, powered by her lift, RACK and BEAUTIFUL WINGS set out on a flight across the eastern sea.

VII

I, RACK THE HEALER, sing of my joy with the satellite in opposition to the sun, rising in the cold, airless heights—brilliant, but with dark valleys forming shadows on its face. I can reach out and touch its face, not with my mind, as the Far Seers do, but with my imagination, as dreamers do. I dream and my dreams are turning true; welded to my flesh is Beautiful Wings, whose body, even in flight, nourishes that which we have made together.

I share with her the elation of freedom from the pull of the planet. Through her mind I see the delicate design of the magnetic field and with my own force coupled with hers, for we are one, I push against it, use its power to send our bodies flying. The bright gleaming satellite comes through space to meet us, the clouds roil darkly beneath us and the planet turns and swims in its circle of the sun. I feel myself giving of my surplus substance to

power our soaring. I wonder at it.

The limits of the imagination know no bounds and I speak with her, telling her of the satisfaction I have known in my wanderings. She shares with me that curiosity which, to my knowledge, has in the past been limited to those of my kind. We are not dismayed by the length of the passage, but use it to see with our eyes the far, bright spots the Far Seers tell us are other suns like ours. The basic laws of nature must work even there—planets swim and nature peoples those planets with life, for life is the be all and end all.

I hail you, all you far-flung Power Givers and Healers and all your loves. May your unions produce a balance. May all of you—where the far suns glitter dimly—find your tints to be brilliant and your blendings all-powerful. For I know the goodness of life and share your joy as I invite you to share mine.

I see flamboyant pictures of hope. I see the survival factor waxing. I see understanding. I see love. I see the race rising to overcome the hardships of our ancient home, replenishing the air, stilling the storms to allow the toxicity to settle into the sink holes, leaving the planet to us.

Are we at the mercy of the planet? No. For if we merely took what was offered, we would die gasping in the clouds of death.

The books of the learned thinkers tell us (and why that rather dim, antique word picture there—what is a book?) that we are beloved of nature and yet she does her best, in every way, at every moment of the sun circle, to kill us. Nature is the sacred force and is therefore not to be questioned. Tampering is not allowed. Witness my own problems involving an ancient law that says one must not dig in the softness or the hardness of the soil lest the poisons of death overtake one. But I, Rack the Healer, have, in effect, dug. I have wetted my hands in the products of the soft earth, pushing my fingers into the muck of a new streambed with impunity.

You, out there, are you bound by tradition? Are your Far Seers blind to new knowledge?

I COULD, with my strength, drive us, using the mind force of Beautiful Wings, to catch that swimming world out there, that bright, dark-shadowed planet, our satellite, and speak with my pictures to the men there. With my eyes I see it and think, ah, how clear, how bright. How clean the air. Is it not as old, not as wasted, not as soiled as our world? Not, I think, for otherwise it would glow with the poison yellows and purples rather than with the clarity of the hot water that gushes from the rocks in the valley I found beyond the river.

Yes, I am strong, full of sub-

stance. Yet as we soar I feel the cold seep through my scales and slow my blood and my love shivers against me and we drop to the upper thickness of the clouds to warm ourselves with the heat of the sun caught there, captured under that thick blanket. There we live on my stored air, finding not even a particle of free air for our lungs as our gills expel the gases without allowing a breath to pass. Down here is reality. Here is my world, her world—the world that belongs equally to all of us. Here is the reality that binds us within our scales and minds. Here our outer lids close and we are in darkness, for the tender membranes of our inner lids are scalded by the harshness of it. Here we soar on instinct alone, guided by the Healer's sense of direction, by the ability of my love to measure distances with accuracy —water below, clouds around us, the bright sky hidden. On the surface, skimming slowly, seeking, we find pockets of breathable air and I replenish, but the storms are hidden and the storms that are abating in my homeland behind us rage still on the sea and the heavy waters heave, drenching our feet. Here is cruel nature—blasphemous thought, but true. Outside the protective community of my birth, I, Rack the Healer, outlaw, can think such thoughts yet I have to hide them, for my love is not as cynical as I.

The water of the sea is warm and I remember the feel of it on my scales as I dive. I remember the feel of the slick, pulpy plants in my fingers as I contribute to the welfare of the race by gathering the food source.

It is said that the people of the eastern lands eat of the flesh of the small, armored animals that crawl in the beds of slime source. But our Far Seers call them poison. Does this not speak of the fallibility of the law-givers? I have not seen the proof but it is recorded. In the same sea that washes the shores of both my homeland and the eastern lands, would the small, armored animals be poison for some and food for others?

I know only that there is much to learn and I, Rack the Healer, intend to stretch my mind until I feel it strain within its scales. For I have known the joy of union. Only favored ones are allowed more than an experience. I have known the joy and I think—although I will check with the store of knowledge in the minds of the eastern Keepers— that I am unique in that aspect, of joining my body totally with a Power Giver, her blood my blood, her organs open to my healing powers.

True, I may be suffering from excess pride, but can such a one think seriously about resigning himself to tradition, when such small innovations open such broad vistas of possibility?

We hunger. We suck the good broth from my pack and it re-

freshes us. My cells glow, grow, engorge themselves and I feel my strength flowing through my welded tongue into her body and, to please me, she allows us to drop from fearful heights, like stones dropped from the escarpment, falling, falling, until, with a long, sweeping rise, we soar again and I feel the blood drain into my legs and am giddy with delight and we laugh and sweep in long swoops through the dawning sky as the rising sun brightens the low clouds and sends its glow to greet us.

Around us is our world. We are not totally free, for we are dependent on the broth. For that we are dependent on the Far Seers who have tamed the hairy, many-legged Webber, who have bred the deadly Juicers to giant size and who milk them and combine the sticky material exuded by the Webbers with the fiery fluid of the Juicers to form vats of the Material to hold the broth. We are not independent, for nature has decreed that it takes the three mobile forms to provide food and shelter—Far Seers, Healers, Power Givers, working together. The particular mental talents of the Far Seers blend the products of the Webbers and the Juicers, mold the Material, start the process of breakdown in the pulpy slime-source plants that results, with power from the Power Givers, in our food. And we, the Healers, gather the slime source. So we are dependent on one another. My love and I must become a part of a community in the eastern lands which, the senses of Beautiful Wings tell us, are lying ahead where the clouds billow high.

But there will be free times. Then we will fly, our packs with us, to see the unseen lands, to explore the vast empty spaces, to walk the barren rocks of the planet. For we have at least the freedom of unlimited flight. I find, after that long, long distance, that I am scarcely hurt, that my resources are almost totally intact. With my metabolism and her ability to climb the lines of force radiated from the planet we could truly soar all the way off this dying orb and seek our brothers on the far worlds.

Ah, you see, I am Rack the Healer, dreamer.

VIII

WEATHERED MOUNTAIN the Far Seer, making a routine check of his place, noted the burden of the soaring Power Giver—a healthy young Healer with an almost empty pack—and mused. He was old. Named for his place, that ancient, eroded range against which the sea rolled on the west, he had lived too many sun circles to be amazed by the willful waste of the Power Giver's substance. The line of flight traced back to the sea and that meant only one thing, a joy flight, for no one wanting to get

from one place to the other would be traveling that route.

Weathered Mountain was more concerned that the new beginning was not bringing the expected rise in the survival factor. He was engaged in measuring the output of food and was grumpily becoming convinced that short rations were in the offing, since the outside conditions did not allow the Healers a full day's work in the sea. He, of course, would be as short in his rations as anyone—it was the nature of things—and at his age even minor discomforts displeased him.

He paid no more attention to the soaring Power Giver and her burden until his senses, swinging out automatically, sensed that they were lowering into his place. He checked identity idly—then rose quickly, moving with a spring in his legs which he had thought was long since gone, for what he saw pushed survival factors and food production into the back of his old mind and filled him with a youthful excitement.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome," he sent. "Welcome to my place and welcome to my air and my broth and my meat."

Rack sent thanks and said privately, "This place is as good as any." Beautiful Wings agreed, although she was a bit awed by the high-piled rocky bones of the ancient mountain range.

People, they found, were the same their world over. Weathered Mountain the Far Seer was no different from his counterparts in their homeland. And his establishment, with one noticeable difference, was much like those at home. However, gleaming nuggets of hard material in a display case caught Rack's eye and interest.

"We do, indeed, come from across the sea," he absently answered Weathered Mountain's query regarding the length of his journey.

"Then your Power Giver must have rest. There is a vacant chamber, my prime Keeper having unfortunately died during the winter."

"She is young and strong," Rack said, "and relatively unharmed. She prefers to stay with me."

"As you wish," Weathered Mountain said, seating himself. The excitement had begun to make his old limbs tremble. "Have you then developed new techniques for soaring?"

Rack pondered the question. In this strange land, where people were said to eat the flesh of sea animals, he was at a disadvantage. He was not yet ready to reveal the amazing thing that had happened between him and Beautiful Wings.

"Only a long period of rest and heavy feeding and breathing in advance," he said. "And, as I said, she is unusually strong for a Power Giver."

Weathered Mountain was not content with the answer, but there

were larger questions. In his lifetime no one had crossed the sea. The last crossing, made in the lifetime of his grandfather, had been for a comparison of survival factors and a trade in air readings which had indicated that conditions were much the same on both sides of the wide waters and that the same deadly air moved over all lands.

"The purpose of your trip, then," he sent politely, "if you are prepared to discuss it with such a one?"

"We are honored, indeed, to be greeted by one of such accumulated wisdom," Rack said, "for I detect the presence of a double picture of the mind of a Keeper."

"It is true that I pride myself on my interest in learning," said Weathered Mountain, "but you flatter me." He smiled. "The new Keeper is young and has been newly filled with the store of minute knowledge formerly kept in the mind of the old one who, sadly, died. However, during the process of transferral, I noted that we have the complete records of the last visit from across the sea, if you are interested."

"In time, perhaps," Rack said, raising the Far Seer's curiosity to a feverish level. "But it is not observation of nature—at least not in the form of survival factors and air readings—that has brought us. I confront you with a new piece of information—at least new to our land. It is our wish to compare—to discover if any knowledge of a comparable nature is available in the lands of the east."

BEAUTIFUL WINGS cast a look at him, for he had not discussed his plans with her. She, with the non-inventive mind of a Power Giver, had envisioned Rack applying for a position in the area of the Far Seer for both of them.

"Ah," sent Weathered Mountain in expectancy.

"Perhaps it would be best," Rack said, "for you to step into—a given and exact location in my mind."

"If you permit."

"Enter."

He blocked in the area he wanted the old man to examine, felt the mind tendrils of the Far Seer. He waited. The exact impressions, the memory, the feel, the weight, the texture, the taint of wet, soft earth, were there as the Far Seer examined Rack's stored memory of the odd material from the valley of the hot waters. Rack waited, slightly nervous. A bit of his fear must have leaked, for the Old Far Seer sent amusement.

"Your law-givers still abide by that hoary old taboo?"

Rack felt relief. "I am pleased to find that the wise Far Seers of the east value knowledge above tradition."

"Do you see these?" Weathered Mountain asked, indicating his

precious collection of hard-material nuggets.

"I think there is a connection between the hard materials and the Old Ones," Rack said. "Do you find that foolish?"

A mental shrug. "One does not fully understand. I wish you had brought the new thing."

"Its value, of course, prevented that."

"Yes." A blankness came as the Far Seer withdrew for contemplation.

When he sent again he asked questions. Rack, freed of the fear of punishment, answered, telling of the methods used to unearth the object.

"It is said by some that the Old Ones built with stone," Weathered Mountain remarked.

A wave of excitement sent Rack's mind speculating. "There is evidence?"

"Suspicion. Guessing. Curious formations have been found."

"And in your lands you have discovered no object made of the curious material?"

"None, We do, of course, value the hard materials for their beauty, if not for their usefulness. There is a certain competition for their possession."

"And do they come from the subsurface?" Rack asked.

"No Healer can withstand the low areas," Weathered Mountain said.

"But there are areas—such as the valley of the hot waters—where digging is possible?"

"It is said." Amusement. "When I am offered a hard-material nugget in exchange for a certain favor, such as a change of duty time or an extra ration of the Material, I do not question the Healer too closely."

"And your knowledge of the Old Ones?"

"It is not one of my interest areas, but there are some who are as fascinated with the Old Ones as you. I can put you in contact with them. Is this, then, this pursuit of the old myths, your sole reason for journeying across the sea?"

"Is not knowledge worthy of the pursuit?" Rack asked.

Weathered Mountain, vaguely disappointed, but still stimulated by the contact, said, "My area is the area of interest of all Far Seers —life and the maintenance thereof. Would the sure knowledge that your odd object is the work of the Old Ones help those who have left their establishments in the low lands of the interior for lack of air?"

"My question, if answered, might have bearing," Rack said. "I am interested in knowing if life has always been at the mercy of nature or—and this is not meant to be blasphemy—"

"Blasphemy is an outdated concept," Weathered Mountain sent, "at least to one as old as I."

"Could the Old Ones have known

more than we credit them with? Did they in any way control the forces of nature?"

WEATHERED MOUNTAIN was silent. After a long pause he spoke. "I find that I am, after all, not past the ability to be shocked. Your question presents, indeed, a startling concept. Nature, my young Healer, is nature. How would you control her? By stilling the movements of the air? As long as the planet spins, there will be movements of the air. Moreover, the calculations of Wide River the Far Seer, in a moment of pure idleness, prove that if the air were stilled, allowed to settle, only the peaks of the highest mountains would extend above the heavy gases."

"I think in smaller pictures," Rack said. "If the Old Ones used the hard materials, for what did they use them? Would the discovery of such information be of more than passing interest to us? Is the object I found in the valley of the hot waters something left by the Old Ones? Or has it, as my Far Seers think, fallen from the vastness of the space outside? And, if so, if it is a flying, falling, alien object, is it still not amazing? For if it came from one of the worlds out there—was it not crafted by men like us? I see no conflict in either theory, for both contain much that should interest our minds. Life exists, according to our best thinking, on all worlds. Why would nature provide a world if not to support life?"

"Had I not seen the death of a Keeper just days ago I could be more in sympathy with your theory," Weathered Mountain said. "And since you seem to be of a strong, inquiring mind, I will add something that has not been revealed to any mind other than a Far Seer's. It is the prediction of our combined minds, after a vast picture of measurements and agonizing analysis, that life on this planet will cease to exist, save for the inert plants of the poison sink holes, in a frighteningly short period of sun circles, a period well within the range of the mind of a Healer. Does this shock you?"

Rack felt weak. He seized Beautiful Wings' hand and felt her tremble. Such a thought, the extinction of all life, was unbearable.

"As do your Far Seers," Weathered Mountain said, "we measure the growth of the Breathers in the southern seas. We read the air and the poisons therein. What we read discourages us. We read a steady decline in the quantity of good air. We read lower and lower survival factors. We measure the emanations of the sun and the movements of the air. We find little to indicate hope."

"Should this be true," Rack said, "then there is ever more reason for inquiry." He was tempted to tell the Far Seer that

something new had come to him, the ability to blend with Beautiful Wings' flesh and to heal. "For who knows where inquiry might lead?"

WEATHERED MOUNTAIN was tired. He longed for the comfort of his rack with the new Keeper beside him, soft and warm. At first he had hoped that the unusual journey across the sea had brought new information, perhaps a good survival factor reading to indicate that somehow, against all logic, the planet was starting a new cycle of replenishing itself. Instead he had been subjected to the wild speculations of the mind of a Healer, had been given only one piece of new information of doubtful use. It was true that the knowledge of a strange, unexplained object was not in any way going to put clean air over the abandoned low lands of the interior. The existence of the object would not save one life.

"I rest," he sent. "You are welcome to use my air and drink of my broth. You are free to use the stored knowledge in the mind of my Keeper." At the doorway he paused. "In spite of the superb condition of your Power Giver the journey back to your homeland will, of course, be impossible. You must therefore choose your community. You will be welcome in mine. We can always use a strong Healer and a young Power Giver. I note your attachment and will assign your periods of free time so that you may be together. Take your pick of the unused establishments in my place and be part of us if you choose."

Rack, too, knew disappointment. He was not sure what he was seeking, but the Far Seer of the mountains had added little to his store of knowledge beyond a doubtful picture of the Old Ones building with stone. That would bear investigation during his first free period. He had also been given other food for thought—the pessimistic prediction of death for all. It was small consolation that the prediction would allow him his full lifespan, him and his Power Giver and their offspring. But what lay ahead for his grandchild, should Beautiful Wings give birth to a Healer or a Power Giver? Death? The end of life on the entire planet? That he would not accept.

Soaring low, he and Beautiful Wings examined unused establishments, selected a spot on the side of a craggy, bone-bare mountain where updrafts brought occasional breaths of good air. There they rested, blended minds, installed the new colony of Breathers from the scant reserves of Weathered Mountain's place.

To warrant the kindness they worked, Beautiful Wings powering a vat of brewing broth, Rack diving into the murky, heavy sea to pluck slime source. Conditions improved slightly, giving the lie

to Weathered Mountain's dire prophecy of doom. Life was good. While working, Rack came to know his fellow workers. He compared knowledge and was told—to his mounting excitement—of the methods used by eastern Healers to collect the hard material. In safe spots, scattered and always rare, they actually used tools fashioned of the Material to turn the soil and find the telltale streaks of waste that indicated the possible presence of a nugget. He was astounded to find that the hard materials, once the surface of the soil was scratched, seemed to be relatively plentiful and, although his pride in the ownership of three nuggets—two back in his establishment and out of reach, one mounted on Beautiful Wings' breast—was damaged, his hope was not. While visiting the establishment of a fellow Healer he saw a nugget of amazing size and shape. One flat, gleaming side reflected his image. It was a treasure—a crafted object, obviously, rather than an actual nugget. Astounding! More convinced that ever that the Old Ones had been more than a shiftless race of savages living on the fat of a young planet, he approached his first free period with anticipation.

IX

BEAUTIFUL WINGS' belly began to stretch with the life inside it. New scales sprang up to cover the expanded area of flesh. They would molt and fall after the birth returned her to normal size. After working through the new beginning and into the summer, she and Rack found stable warm air for their free period and, using their technique for soaring on Rack's strength, they explored. They found much vast, uninhabited emptiness. As in their homeland, most of the terrain was bare. Low spots stank with rank growth. Broad, thick-watered rivers crisscrossed the land. Beside them, digging without fear, Rack found discoloration and indication of the past existence of much hard material. When their supplies were used up they soared back to the establishment, enriched with three tiny nuggets of the strange stuff. There they refreshed, breathed, ate. Rack's hand could feel the life in the body of Beautiful Wings. The swelling of her belly never ceased to fill him with a proud joy.

In the time of the end of summer storms he sought the mind of Weathered Mountain's Keeper, Beautiful Wings was confined to the establishment, her time nearing. Of most interest to Rack was the store of knowledge transferred from the older Keeper, often chaoticaly misfiled. Ancestral records were mixed with fragments of ancient picture poetry, planet movements with speculation on the ancient thoughts of the Far Seers,

broth inventories with the familiar Book of Rose the Healer.

Rack sorted through the misfiled records, musing over the beautiful pictures of the scant works of poetic Healers, passing the dry, technical records of the Far Seers, seeking something, something.

It was not true, he found, that the people of the east were unresponsive to duty. Once, long ago, Red Earth had indicated—or had it been one of Rack's teachers?—that the eastern civilization was based on the bartering of hard material nuggets in exchange for services. The facts were different. The easterners valued the hard material for itself as a subject of wonder and as a source of beauty. But it was also true that to exchange favors for a nugget was not unknown.

The mind of the Keeper held an exact record of each exchange made by Weathered Mountain. In addition Rack found an analysis of different types of hard material and this interested him.

Apart from this information he learned nothing new as the birth time neared and he abandoned his visits to the Keeper to tend Beautiful Wings.

AS THE awareness came to her he watched in awe. Thus did nature work. Soon he would know his child. Healer? Far Seer? Keeper? Power Giver? He hoped for the last—a daughter with the beauty of his love, to be named Many Pleasures in honor of the union in the far north of his homeland. Beautiful Wings asked nature—in a soft, pleased picture—for a true Healer. She writhed now, feeling the early pain, Rack, his hands on her belly, saw the miracle of birth flowering, the red, beautiful tint reminding him of the joining, Scales flowered, molted.

"Come, Many Pleasures," Rack sent to the unresponsive, tiny mind. "It is a pleasant world and it will be yours."

Beautiful Wings knew instinctively what do do. Her body did that for which it was designed, creating new life. Her lower portions mottled ruby red, molted, spread to reveal a soft fleshy area. The birth began with a new day's dawning. A tiny head emerged, encased in a fleshy sack, and a soft, scaleless body followed. It wiggled with life and reeked with the products of birth until Rack, trying to hide his disappointment, cleaned his Keeper daughter and gave her to her mother to suckle at the flowering breast bulges.

Nature's balance was maintained. Ungovernable forces decreed the type of the child, and nature obviously needed another Keeper.

And their life would not be filled with a growing Power Giver or a curious wild young Healer.

"We will have each other," Beautiful Wings sent.

Rack berated himself for letting his sadness show. He found some joy in watching the infant suckle the rich juices of her mother's body, but he could not help but think of the fate of the new one, to be kept by a Far Seer, used for his pleasure.

Ah, but she, too, would know pleasure. Her small mind would not go forward, would stay much as it was, knowing sensation, knowing hunger and discomfort and comfort and good air. Protected inside an inpregnable establishment, she would live a long, happy life. And in living she would contribute—for what was civilization but an accumulation of knowledge and experience? Without Keepers, civilization would be dependent on frailer memories and knowledge would perish.

"We will have each other," Rack agreed and sent pictures of soaring, traveling. The ice of the far south, the fire of the south lands, the fields of the Breathers in the southern sea. They would see all.

"And—" She sent a devastatingly strong picture, full of sadness and nostalgia. The establishment where they had known their initial bliss, then the far north and the repetition.

"Do you miss it so?" he asked.

"I shouldn't. It isn't logical." She smiled as the infant had its fill and slept.

"I will take you home," he said.

She sent alarm.

"Surely they will listen to reason," he said. "Here we dig and the promised death does not come. Too, Red Earth should be apprised of the predictions of the eastern Far Seers, the dire warnings of all-encompassing death."

"I fear for you," she said.

"We have," he told her, "unlimited soaring ability. We could flee to the satellite itself, given enough broth and air to carry us through cold space."

"Silly." She giggled.

"We can in any case fly away again if they are not responsive."

He longed for his homeland. He would take her to the valley of the hot waters. There they would dig and unearth what they could—perhaps something that would pull together his confused thoughts.

When the infant Keeper was able to take broth she was delivered to the establishment of a youthful Far Seer, who had not as yet been provided with a Keeper. She would, they were assured, be given the best of treatment. The Far Seer's tender handling of the baby in their presence comforted them. Rack tried not to think of her future, of her body being used by the Far Seer. He thought instead of the Book of Rack the Healer, the work he had planted in the scarcely formed storage space of her brain. Some day a curious Healer would find it there, read the

pictures and know him. There he had left all his thoughts, all his questions, all his discoveries.

He knew no regret when he and Beautiful Wings soared into the clean, thin air above the early winter clouds. Nature provided and nature made a balance. Behind them was a baby, product of their miraculous union—a baby without a name who had ceased to be theirs when she took her first meal of broth. Ahead was home.

X

PEOPLE were dying in Rack's world. It was the first thing he sensed after an uneventful soar across the sea. In a land where the barren rocks were broken by the gleaming, transparent domes of establishments were new blank spaces.

The Area of Responsibility of Red Earth the Far Seer, home to Rack and Beautiful Wings, was familiar to them in physical contour and in the intangible knowledge of its scattered life. As they soared past the coastal sands they found a blank. Growing Tree the Far Seer, Co-Responsor of Red Earth, was gone. It was as if, on a large board studded with lights, a light had gone off. And, as they continued toward the interior other empty establishments lent a pall of gloom to their homecoming.

The end-of-sun-circle storms had started moving earlier than ever before and were more severe, more extensive. It was fortunate, Rack felt, that soaring on his power was less debilitating than moving on the surface. The relatively small amount of his reserves consumed by the flight left him plenty for the lowering and the hovering over Red Earth's establishment. He sent down his mind, encountered the heat of pleasure below. Red Earth was with his Keeper. Mouth to mouth with Beautiful Wings, Rack waited.

When it was time he sent, "I am Rack the Healer."

He was pleased to received a quick flush of pleasure from Red Earth, but the pleasure was soon damped by surprise, questioning, a heavy sense of duty.

Rack answered, "No, I am not dead. Nor is Beautiful Wing."

"You have come back, then, to submit to the judgment of the law-givers?"

Rack sent the strongest anger and contempt he could muster. "Growing Tree the Far Seer is dead before his time. Gone are Strong Swimmer the Healer, Quick Soar the Power Giver and others in the eastern marches of the area. The storms are early and the Breathers labor in the establishments. At such a time will you be bound by your petty traditions?"

"It is all heavy on my mind," Red Earth admitted. "Your reason for returning, then."

"A message of gloom from the Far Seers of the east," Rack said. "Would you hear in peace?"

"In peace," Red Earth said. "Welcome."

HE HAD not changed, but an aura of sadness hung over Red Earth's establishment. The air was pure and good and Rack used it sparingly. Beautiful Wings was allowed more freedom of breath, since Red Earth was observing the rules of privacy and had not scanned their minds to discover the secret of her apparent good condition after a long soar.

"I have many questions," Red Earth said. "But first—the message."

It was delivered. Red Earth received it with no show of emotion. After a long time he sighed, expelling his air. "We have read the same. But I would like to confirm the conditions in the breeding grounds of the Breathers." He sighed again. "I hesitate, however, to consume the substance of a Power Giver and I must admit I cringe at the thought of going into the outside under storm conditions."

"There is a way," Rack said. He was not sure that what he had in mind would work, but the situation was serious enough to warrant any experiment. The mind of a Far Seer would be required to measure the huge but decreasing picture of Breathers in their broad field of surface slime in the southern sea. "I ask your indulgence to break one of the rules of privacy."

"In what cause?" Red Earth asked.

"Life," he said simply.

"A potent argument. You may act."

Rack walked to stand behind the Far Seer, bent quickly and pressed his small tongue on the bare flesh of the Far Seer's domed head. He did his magic and his flesh melted into the flesh of the Far Seer. Red Earth's mind registered high surprise, but also a quickness of mental grasp that awed Rack.

"Now I understand," Red Earth said excitedly. But something was not right with the Far Seer—it made Rack feel uncomfortable and, even as he continued the merge, began to make repairs on the body of Red Earth. Red Earth was thinking something below the readable level. It was growing stronger, stronger and then it burst out as it became obvious to Red Earth that the Healer's powers were being extended into the Far Seer's body.

"Hail, New One," Red Earth said. "Hail, New One."

"No," Rack said, feeling a flush of embarrassment. "I am Rack the Healer."

The process continued, cell by cell, fiber by fiber, organ by organ. And a sense of excitement spread from the agitated Far Seer

into Rack's mind, into the mind of Beautiful Wings. He, Red Earth, in his dreams, had expected the New One to be a completely new life form, as different from the people as the first Healer had been from the Old Ones. Nature, always guileful, had sent the New One in a common form—but Red Earth was capable of understanding what had happened.

Questions, answers, a growing excitement. Beautiful Wings was thinking only that Rack's new status was fortunate—now there could be no further question of his being punished for past crimes. When Rack finished he left the Far Seer in better health than Red Earth had enjoyed since his youth. She could no longer feel seriously threatened by the predictions of the Far Seers. Her world was good. She had Rack and a rare, lasting love. Their position was secure. They were home.

Red Earth looked to the future and was brought up short when he learned from Rack that Beautiful Wings had given birth to a child.

"A Keeper," Rack told him. "She was left in the care of a young Far Seer of the east."

"No, no, that cannot be," Red Earth said, forgetting himself and searching the mind of Beautiful Wings for confirmation. Then he insisted that nature would not deliver a New One and then let him be wasted in death without having passed on his abilities. "Perhaps," he mused, "the Keeper is also different."

"She seemed as all Keepers," Rack said.

"You will breed again, then," Red Earth said.

"Perhaps," Rack agreed. "The experience was a repeated one."

"Yes, you will breed again," Red Earth continued, excited once more. "When you tint we will select the most suitable mate." He felt the flare of jealousy from Beautiful Wings, sent soothing things, said, "Perhaps it will be you, since your attachment is strong.'

IT WAS truly a time for great hopes. To demonstrate his ability, Rack, after eating hungrily, breathing deeply to rebuild, merged with Red Earth's Keeper, planting his healing technique into her storage banks as he felt her blood, her body, her organs. Then it was time for serious talk. Rack and Beautiful Wings, with Red Earth feeding the data to his Keeper, told of their flight to the east, sent the pictures in detail of all their activities there. Thus was history served, for it was the duty of all to record knowledge. In return Rack was briefed on conditions at home and they were discouraging. The discussion returned to Rack's statement that something could be done to allow Red Earth to measure the Breathers in their home waters. At first Red Earth was skeptical, but after

a demonstration—during which Beautiful Wings merged with Rack, encompassed both Rack and Red Earth in her field of power and lifted them from the floor to hold them effortlessly—he was convinced.

A strange grouping emerged a short time later from the roiling clouds into the thin, upper air. Face to face, merged, were Rack and Beautiful Wings. Back to back with Rack, Red Earth the Far Seer was making a rare soar, taking it all in, his mind seeing all, feeling the far suns, contacting the face of the satellite, measuring the scant spray of air particles in the vast heights. He let his pleasure flow and it was joined to the ever fresh pleasure of Beautiful Wings and Rack, who had soared higher and longer than any Healer and Power Giver in history. Rack laughed, seeing the bright satellite in the sky, playfully repeating his boast that with his vitality and the power of Beautiful Wings, he could send them all soaring there. But he was sobered when Red Earth, using the distance around the planet as a base, sent a picture and a calculation of the energies involved.

Then pleasure was put aside, for the southern sea was below. They descended through the dense clouds to find only minimum conditions at the surface. Red Earth directed the flight of the Power Giver, crossing the area again and again, his mind storing pictures so vast that they would not stick in Rack's mind.

It was necessary, since the air was scarce and the hard projectiles plentiful, to break his merge with Beautiful Wings, turn and heal Red Earth. When he had finished and she accepted him back he was shocked to see how quickly the heavy burden had sapped her. He felt himself flow out, giving gladly and feeling a tenderness that made Red Earth squirm with discomfort.

"You are never to soar without me," Rack told her sternly.

AFTER a time of mutual healing, once the party was safely back in the Far Seer's establishment, Red Earth went into rapport with his Keeper. For a long period he compared his new pictures with others, drawing occasionally on the minds of his fellow Far Seers and the storage banks of their Keepers. Rack and Beautiful Wings left him to his labors.

Home for Rack and Beautiful Wings was a dome of transparency, for Rack liked to see the outside. Home was also snugness and good air and happiness. Home was Beautiful Wings sleeping peacefully as he watched and waited for Red Earth's results. The survival factor was negative in the establishment's immediate area and the severity of the toxicity

outside cast a pall over Rack's emotions.

The readings of Red Earth confirmed, once he sent them, the predictions of the Far Seers of the east. He announced his finding by making individual contacts with far-flung Far Seers, calling for a council in the largest establishment available, the Eastern Establishment. He promised hope, but did not reveal that its source was a wild dream.

The plan had several phases.

Selected Power Givers transported Healers and Far Seers to the council. There was a drain on all and many perished. The storms were peaking and Rack, sensing the damage, wanted to spread himself to all of them and heal them, but he knew by some instinctive measuring quality in his head that the feat would be impossible and would result only in his own depletion. The gathering was small. Proceedings began with a dry, long-winded recital of the observations of the Far Seers, confirming once again the great threat to life on the planet. When it was agreed that the observations of the eastern Far Seers read the same as the new information gathered by Red Earth a period of discussion followed. New deaths were reported in sad pictures. Predictions of still more deaths left the gathering moodily silent. No one could actually believe the verdict of the data, the end of life in all the world, but the evidence was undeniable.

"Where," asked a young Far Seer attached to the Eastern Establishment, "is the hope you promised us, Red Earth? The Breathers die. The clouds stir the accumulated poisons. People are perishing."

"He is among us," Red Earth said.

RACK demonstrated. He merged, to Beautiful Wings' squirming displeasure, with a weakened Power Giver, bringing her back to strength. He ate, breathed, stored, demonstrated again with an ancient Far Seer, who was eased, but who was so near natural death that Rack was unable to do more than give him momentary comfort.

"It is my hope," Red Earth said, "that the power has been latent in all Healers. We will listen as Rack the Healer explains. Then we will try to emulate him."

Healers placed their small mouths on the odd heads of the Far Seers, on the mouths of the Power Givers, listening, seeing the pictures sent by Rack, who had the power. Far Seers observed and concluded that the power in Rack came from a totally unknown section of the mind, a strangely shaped area which seemed to be missing completely in the other Healers. The experiment was abandoned.

"Nature has sent the New One—is it accepted?" Red Earth was an impressive figure, a natural leader.

"It is accepted."

"Would she send the New One without purpose?"

A chorus of negative, negative.

"There remains then only the problem of finding the purpose," Red Earth said. "And, for some time, she has been trying to tell us." He sent a picture of elapsed time, measuring back to Rack's trek to the valley of the hot waters. Next Red Earth projected the exact picture of the object Rack had found there. "This object, which has been studied by our foremost minds, was a message," Red Earth sent.

Rack, who had been letting his mind wander, was brought to full attention. He had been unaware that such a study had been made.

"The fact that nature told this Healer that it was time to dig—" a shudder of fear passed through the assembly—"was also a message, a message we chose to ignore." Red Earth pushed on following a dramatic pause. "In the beginning nature imbued the Healers with a fascination for hard-material nuggets. To them they are beauty, wonder, possessions of esthetic worth, while the rest of us consider them useless. The reason for this apparent folly of nature is now clear. Do you see it?"

He waited. His audience sent small, shamed negatives. Rack himself was silent, waiting to hear Red Earth's conclusion, trying to group his own confused thoughts regarding the nuggets, the piece of strange material, the whole of it.

Red Earth continued: "Balanced against this curiosity, this yen for possession of the nuggets, was the ancient knowledge that to dig meant death. Thus it was for—" Red Earth sent an incomprehensibly long picture of time and resumed: "yet, even as the planet died, nature had long since planted our salvation. It lay there in the valley of the hot waters, a strange and wonderful place—for where in our tortured world does one find clean and pure water, good air, soft, unpoisoned soil? This valley did not form by accident, but as part of nature's design. For—" again that picture of time—"it has been there and Healers have always been a restless, wandering lot. But no Healer came upon this wondrous valley until Rack the New One set out on his summer explorations on that fateful sun circle. Had another Healer come upon this valley, he would have breathed the air, attended the beauty of the place, looked for nuggets—but would he have dug?" Red Earth indicated a young Healer. "Would you have had the courage to go against the ancient teaching?"

"I fear negative."

"Only the New One would have had such daring," Red Earth said.

Rack, embarrassed, said, "I felt that there was no danger. Then, too, I didn't dig. It was the water that dug."

"Yet yours was an act of a New One," Red Earth continued, motioning for Rack to be patient, "and it was part of nature's intricate design. It was her intent for the New One to dig, to find new values, to unearth this object." He had it in his hand. "And this object has been adjudged by our best minds not to have its origin on this planet."

Rack felt disappointment.

"So," Red Earth continued, "this message from nature, this alien object, has come to us from where?" He paused. "A sister world? We who can contact such worlds know—from the long lag in the sending and the receiving by our senses—the distances involved. Yet there is another world, a world much closer, a world that spins around our own barely a short lag in senses away. The long string of events points to one thing. This strange object, which lay hidden under the soil until now, is a message sent by nature from that world. Our satellite."

RACK thought Red Earth's theory might have possibilities. After having searched two continents for traces of the Old Ones he was prepared to consider longer reaches.

Red Earth went on: "The message is full of meaning. There is life on the satellite, obviously, for Rack the Healer's original contention that this is the remnant of a crafted object stands. Nothing in nature is like it. In this manner we are told that there is life on our sister world. We are told this in conjunction with great events, the accelerating pace of death on this planet, the emergence of the New One. We are all aware of the old values. We believe, deep in our souls, in the wisdom of nature. We know that planets, worlds, are the home of life. We know that nature in her wisdom makes it possible for life to continue. We, in our ignorance of her grand design, cannot envision the continuation of life under the worsening conditions—but is she asking us for action?"

Rack remembered his hazy, almost blasphemous thinking in regard to the manipulation of the environment by man. Red Earth himself was now treading on new and daring ground. The squirmings of the assembly confirmed it.

"I say she is. I say that she is telling us that we must act now. And I say the message is clear. She is informing us that there is some connection between life on our nearest sister world and our own survival."

"If the message is clear to you,

Red Earth, I wish you would share the knowledge," said an old Far Seer dryly.

"So I shall," Red Earth retorted. "The import of all of these events is simple. It is intended that the New One and his mate, Beautiful Wings the Power Giver, soar to the world that rises each night in our eastern skies."

RACK started. Had the sly old Far Seer been prying into his private fantasies? Around him he heard mutters of disbelief. Beautiful Wings looked at him, a sudden cold fear radiating from her mind.

A doubtful Far Seer named Gray Body asked, "If the difficulties, and there are many, are overcome—if the New One reaches the satellite and finds life there—how will this save us?"

"If we could fathom nature's ways, we would have all the answers," Red Earth said. "Since we do not we must proceed with faith. The object found by the New One is my basis for belief. The inhabitants of the satellite world have crafted the thing with a skill far beyond ours. As you may know, this material is impregnable to the acids of the atmosphere. It is not workable with tools fashioned from the Material. It is truly wonderful. Contact with such people would perhaps provide us with the techniques we would need to alter the falling survival factor."

Red Earth's questioner sent objection. "If this wonderful race of people is so advanced, why has it not made the far flight to our world—rather than wait for us to make the contact?"

"For this," Red Earth agreed, "I have no answer. I merely repeat my faith. The events of nature are never without logic. Even the fatal winter storms follow a prescribed pattern imposed by the movements of the planet—the tilt of the planet on its axis, the position of the satellite and the strength of emissions of the sun. Not even death is random in nature, for it takes the old at the prescribed time. I contend that the seemingly random happenings, if we could but understand them, are all a part of the whole. I contend that the nature of the Healers, combined with the lure of the solid nuggets of hard material, the emergence of the New One, the conclusions of doom for life on our world, are all part of nature's scheme to send us into space. What we will find there I do not know." He paused, continued sadly. "It is against my teachings and my belief, but we must, in this crucial time, consider all possibilities. Perhaps we err in our understanding—and I project a shocking picture, I know. I defend it from charges of blasphemy on the grounds of scientific speculation. Is it totally inconceivable to

think that life, sacred as it is, is confined to this planet?"

It was indeed a shocking picture, but the seriousness of the times allowed it.

"Should this be so—and I pray to nature that it is not—then her design could be, just could be, to pass this life along to a fresh, clean, pure-aired world. In short, the abilities of Rack the New One could be gifted to him for the sole purpose of transplanting life from this dying planet to a new one. How often, in history, does a union produce such a lasting relationship?" He indicated Rack and Beautiful Wings, hand in hand, the Power Giver pale and fearful. "Its strength can be felt, even now."

"I cannot accept the possibility of extinction of life on the planet," said a bold Healer.

"Nor can I," agreed Red Earth. "But can we risk going against nature's obvious directives?"

"There is merit in your thoughts," sighed the old, wise Far Seer who had been given momentary relief from the aches of old age by Rack. "I will be a part of the study."

"Welcome," Red Earth said. "For it will take the powers of many to prepare such a venture. Time will be required. If it were possible to send the New One soaring to the satellite today, I would be fearful that we were making a wrong decision, but we will have time to study as we plan. Should events occur to prove us wrong we will have done nothing more serious than waste the time of those who have little time remaining. Should, for example, nature decree a new joining for the New One we can but hope for a breeder for his offspring to carry his seed. This possibility has not been neglected in my thinking, but I do not hold forth hope. Our recent readings indicate that not even the abilities of many New Ones would keep alive our people in a sufficient picture to carry our civilization forward. At best the breeding of a new New One from Rack's loins would buy us another generation of life before the conditions wiped out even the New Ones, for our conclusions are that the worsening of the survival conditions is irreversible. Still, we have time. Perhaps something will be revealed to us. If not, in the end, we have only the clear messages. Rack the New One and his chosen mate, Beautiful Wings, shall journey into the cold of airless space in search of the salvation of life."

He stood silent. When the buzzing thoughts stilled, he sent, "Is it agreed?"

"Affirmative, affirmative," the assembly sent.

"But you haven't even asked us what we think," Beautiful Wings wailed, picturing death, vast empty space, unknown worlds.

"We know you will do your duty, whatever it is," Red Earth said soothingly.

"It is the nature of the Power Givers to be fearful," Rack sent. "We will do our duty." He touched her with his armored hand, sent his mind to blend with hers, quieted her fears. She, feeling his strength, was reassured.

"Yes," she said. "We will do our duty."

XI

RED EARTH had moved his site of operations at least temporarily to the large dome of the Eastern Group Establishment. Space was needed to house the team which had been put together carefully to plan and execute the grand, hopeful soar of Rack the Healer and Beautiful Wings the Power Giver.

In addition to Rack, Beautiful Wings and Red Earth, the group consisted of Shadow on the Moon, an aptly named young Far Seer who had spent much time in study of the satellite; Yellow Sky the Power Giver, who, to conserve the energy of Beautiful Wings, was to make some test soars with Rack and, for the balancing value of his skeptical mind, the ancient Far Seer Gray Body. Supplemental to these were additional Healers and Keepers, the Healers to perform any needed goings about in the forbidding storms, the Keepers to assure detailed records of the events. Since the Eastern Group Establishment had to continue its function as the prime source of broth and the Material, the extra bodies inside the large dome strained the available resources and made demands on privacy. However, no one grumbled.

"Rack the New One," Red Earth said, "has been responsible for creating in my brain a new concept of the order of things. In his eagerness to prove the existence, nay, even the abilities of the Old Ones, he set me to speculating about the nature of life on this world and on our sister worlds. On our world, at least in the beginning, life had many forms. Have you ever considered the meaning of some of our traditional name pictures? For example, that of our late brother, Growing Tree the Far Seer. His name picture is something from the young days of our world when the soil was less toxic and could support vegetable life of an amazing complexity. His picture is of a large, growing thing, green and fragile. In our records one finds many such names, one of the more noted being the picture of Rose the Healer. His name picture suggests something of beauty, a bright, fragile, short-lived thing of the soil. Some of our other traditional names suggest that there was, in addition

to vegetation, life of other sorts in the youthful days of the planet. Flying things. Indeed, our own Juicers show vestigial wings. And the young of the Juicers are winged before their change. It is reasonable, then, to think that nature adjusts her life to planetary conditions, providing variety for the sake of beauty and perhaps for some practical purpose unknown to us. She also makes her changes as conditions alter in the accepted order of decay. She does not, I believe, destroy life, but alters its forms, utilizing the life force. Some believe that there is a measurable quantity of life allotted to each world. Should this be true, then the life force which lives in our bodies could have, in the past, furnished animation to beings beyond our imagination. At this stage of our world's development life is concentrated in a small picture of forms—the four forms of us, the two of insects and the combination of vegetation and animal which is the Breather. To think of the logic of this arrangement is to accept the concept of infallible nature. You may point to the poison things of the sink holes and question this statement, but who is to say that those poison things do not have a place in the future of life? We do not know the exact form of the Old Ones, but we do know that the change was a drastic one from Old One to the first Healer. Our New One, the logical advancement of nature, assuming that Rack the Healer's change is incomplete and will be perfected in some future birth, could be so radically different as to be able to utilize the poison things of the sink holes for his own good."

"It would, indeed, seem that nothing is random in nature," agreed Gray Body, the old Far Seer. "But in restating it, Red Earth, my brother, are you not seeking to ease the doubts in your mind regarding our present course of action?"

"I shall not deny certain misgivings," Red Earth said. "Some of them are not in keeping with logic, for the pain I feel when I think of losing the presence of two of my fellow beings is purely emotional and not at all fitting for the logical mind of a Far Seer."

"You will not lose, but gain," Rack said. "For the success of our journey will bring changes. We, having replenished our stores on the new, sweet world, will return, bringing to you the wisdom of our brothers there."

"It pleases me to think so," Red Earth said.

"The thought of such a journey is, of course, pleasing to a Healer, who is notoriously footloose," Gray Body sent. "And I fear that one possible outcome of this venture is to be measured only in

the pleasures received by those involved, a Healer who will see more of the universe than any Healer before him, a Power Giver who is to make a soar that will diminish all past soars. Should you find an empty world there—and no wise brothers—you will still be tempted to return, for it is horrible to imagine an empty world. Then what will you bring us?"

"Yes," Red Earth agreed. "Should you discover a world empty of intelligent life, then you must suffer the loneliness. You must stay. You will breed, for nature will not let life die on two worlds. You will tint again and give birth and tint again to produce breeding couples to people the new world. We must believe so."

"But if we can accept this blasphemy," asked one of the Healers, "then should we not also entertain other blasphemies and at least consider random factors as such?"

Red Earth said, "We come once again to faith. Compare the early pictures of this world, the fruitful, varied forms of life, the rich, sweet air and the variety of foods. Consider the pictures in the Book of Rose the Healer of the Old Ones dying in vast pictures of bodies—compare those with the small picture of our population. Is it not logical, assuming that there is a constant life force, that we, as individuals, are allotted a larger picture of life force than was allotted to the Old Ones, thus explaining our superiority? Is it not possible that there is a life force on a new, empty world, waiting to inhabit the body of life? One of the possibilities is that Rack and Beautiful Wings will find an empty planet, true. But it is just as believable to think that nature awaits them with a reserve of life force which, once absorbed, will make them more than they are."

"Your faith makes me feel humble," said Gray Body.

"What else is there?" Rack asked. "I share Red Earth's faith. Nature has never deserted us. She has given us good life in the past, with pockets of sweet air and quantities of broth. She has made us thinking beings who can see beauty. A mother will not abandon her children."

"It is time," Red Earth said, "to leave our speculation and apply ourselves to the task at hand. Shadow on the Moon, the youngest Far Seer who studies the satellite, will outline some of the difficulties."

SHADOW on the Moon, agitated by the attention, began his presentation. "Our senses tell us of large mountains and valleys. We think—since on our world the rains and the winds have eaten our mountains—that

this fact alone assures a supply of good air, for uneroded mountains indicate a youthful world. Thus we anticipate no difficulty once the satellite is reached. The dangers lie in the journey through airless space. For there the particles are so scattered, so few, that not even the lungs of a powerful Healer such as Rack could find breath. Enough air must be stored for Rack and his Power Giver to sustain life for—" He sent a picture of days that startled Rack.

"It is not within the power of Rack the Healer," he said.

"So," Shadow on the Moon went on, "it is necessary to provide a store of air and food. I have considered the possibilities. To pack so much would entail a pack of—" He pictured an unwieldy proportion. "This being undesirable, I have suggested an alternate course." He sent a picture of a small establishment, constructed of the Material, complete with Breather tanks and broth vessels.

"The bulk will be far too great," Rack said, thinking of the drain on Beautiful Wings.

"Ordinarily, yes," Shadow on the Moon said. "But there are certain differences between a soar such as we contemplate and a simple soar within the range of our planet's pull." He indicated Beautiful Wings. "Your senses tell you of the nature of the force which surrounds our world. Can you picture the extent of the force?"

She concentrated. "I have never considered it. I have soared high, but I have not felt any diminishing of the power that tugs me back."

"There is greater perceptivity through the senses of a Far Seer." Red Earth said.

"We, too, can see the force of our planet," Shadow on the Moon said. "We cannot utilize it, as do the Power Givers, but our sight extends into the airlessness of space. There, at certain distances, we note a decrease in the power. It is therefore our contention, after careful study, that less power would be required farther out. We see a similar force surrounding the satellite—a smaller force because it is a smaller world. Past a certain point a Power Giver could cease her work, allowing the pull of the sister world to furnish the motive power."

"But," said Beautiful Wings, "in my idle play I have fallen when I have not used my power. If I allow myself to fall for too long the power needed to stop is far greater than the power needed for a simple soar."

"True. That, too, is in our thoughts," Shadow on the Moon said. "We must measure the force needed. For this I suggest practice soars. We measure the force of our planet's pull and compare it with that of the sister world. Then we shall know the

power needed to stop the soar. It will be great, perhaps too great, for the soar in airless space must be faster than any we know." He pictured the drop and once again Rack was awed.

THERE were other difficulties. As the plans were made they seemed to grow until they burdened Rack's mind. The vast picture of distance intimidated him, made him fear, though less for himself than for Beautiful Wings. Never before had such a great demand been made on the gifts of a Power Giver. And as the workers constructed the small establishment that would protect the soarers from the cold airlessness of space—Rack watched and weighed with his mind and despaired.

However, he did his duty. He stored by eating far more than his usual amount, breathing the rich, Breather-made air until his cells—and the new cells added in the form of surplus—were fat with air. He felt bulky, but he knew that each bit of added reserve gave him that much more to share with Beautiful Wings.

To cover all eventualities it was decided that an attempt should be made to teach Rack and Beautiful Wings the techniques of food and Material making. Eggs of the Webbers and the Juicers would be stored in the flying establishment to be hatched, should they find an empty but clean-aired world. Tending the sources of the materials that made the Material was Far Seer responsibility, but Rack went at the lessons with a will. The insects, accustomed only to the mind patterns of the Far Seers, were made restless at first by the presence of others. Rack studied the soothing patterns sent by the Far Seers, duplicated them, became at ease with the hairy Webbers. He carefully stayed out of reach of the vicious stingers of the Juicers, but managed to master the technique of milking the creatures. It was up to Beautiful Wings to use her power to combine the two extracts and after much experimentation she was partially successful. Red Earth assured her that before departure date she would be as adept at making Material and at brewing broth as a Far Seer.

Meanwhile the flying establishment had been completed, stocked with Breathers and was waiting. The group gathered. Rack and Beautiful Wings entered, closed the lock, lay on the comfortable rack. He merged with her and she lifted, her area of power enclosing the establishment, lifting it to the ceiling of the dome and holding it there effortlessly, with Rack's substance and power funneling through their blended flesh to heal and help. Rack was encouraged, for the flying establishment added

only a tiny picture to the drain on their joint resources.

It was time to test the drain in actual soaring. For this Yellow Sky the Power Giver, young and considered beautiful, was to be united with Rack—by decree of the Far Seers. Yellow Sky did not hide her delight at the prospect.

"I fail to understand why, if I am to be the one who makes the soar, I cannot go with you," Beautiful Wings vehemently protested to Rack.

"We must conserve your resources," Red Earth said impatiently when her protest reached him.

Beautiful Wings, sending half-concealed pictures of jealousy, watched as Rack touched his tongue to the tongue of Yellow Sky, merged, began his magic and the flying establishment was lifted rapidly into the dark, swirling clouds. Rack sent back pictures of his condition and the condition of the Power Giver to the minds of the Far Seers. The establishment burst through the clouds into the blackness of the upper air. Yellow Sky had taken them up swiftly, as if to prove to all that she, as well as Beautiful Wings, could power the soar. Rack, in contact with Shadow on the Moon, directed her to slow down and hover.

Motionless, the flying enclosure was almost invisible against the space beyond it, other Power Givers reported. The view below was blocked by the most terrible winter storms in history. Rack had a foretaste of loneliness. Yet he and Yellow Sky were not alone, for the minds of the Far Seers held them, checked them, measured their expenditure of substance.

Exultant, not penalized in the slightest by the fast, heavy lift, the Power Giver radiated joy. Rack, however, was slighty uncomfortable. His mouth to hers, his tongue-flesh merged with hers, he knew the vague unease that always came to him in a merge with anyone other than Beautiful Wings. He was relieved when the Far Seers had enough information to allow the soar to end. He sought seclusion immediately within his chamber at the Eastern Establishment.

That he was being selfish did not occur to him until Beautiful Wings entered softly. He looked up, arranging his features into an expression denoting pleasure.

"Did you not even want to see me?" she asked.

"Of course," he said. "I was merely tired."

"Yet we have soared the wide sea without fatigue," she reminded him.

She was defenseless against his probing mind. Their long closeness had robbed her of the ability to close her mind to him. He entered. What he found hurt him. "You are the most foolish of

Power Givers," he told her with a gentle fondness. "Do you think I could forget so quickly?" He sent pictures of the repeated joining and she melted, coming to touch him.

"I will not allow you to merge with her again," she said.

He laughed. "Then you shall be the one who explains it to Red Earth." But he sent such a wave of love that she purred aloud.

SINCE it was proven that the flying establishment could be soared relatively easily only a few tests remained. With Beautiful Wings trying to be unconcerned, but not being successful in hiding her pique from Rack, the load was lifted once more by Yellow Sky. At the height of the soar, in the thin air of near space, they hovered. Under the guidance of the mind of Shadow on the Moon the flying establishment moved in an arc corresponding to the curve of the planet. Faster and faster it was pushed, Rack sending his energies into the body of the Power Giver. Just as the contact was about to be broken by the curvature of the planet they were told to slow, make a sweeping turn, come back. Then the establishment moved up, up, at an increasing rate of speed—the strain was felt even in Rack's strong body.

They returned to find excitement in the minds of the Far Seers. The reason was the relative reading of power expended in the two methods of gaining speed. One more test was required to confirm the thinking of the Far Seers. And to the relief of Beautiful Wings it was decided to use the team that would make the final long soar.

Rack found joy in being merged once again with Beautiful Wings. He knew her as he knew no other person, knew the vibrant life force of her, the gladness with which she merged, the inner workings of her organs, the miraculous beauty of her cellular structure. His mind sang with hers as she lifted the thin bubble through the toxic clouds to the bright sunlight, the cold, thin air. Up and up they went slowly, conserving energy. And then they followed the curve of the planet. Just before contact was lost the mind of Shadow on the Moon directed them to level, engage the power of Beautiful Wings' mind, push the flying establishment faster, faster.

There was no sensation of speed. Blocked by the curve of the home planet from the mind of the Far Seer, they relied on an instinctive sense of timing to halt the force, to rest light and free as their bodies floated gently from the rack. Disengaged, they examined the situation. The senses of the Power Giver felt the pull from below, but felt also another force that counteracted it, kept the

flying establishment circling the planet at a far height, no energies being expended. They entered the dark of a space night, emerged into the sun, the minds of the Far Seers coming into contact, measuring jubilantly.

After another circle of the planet at a speed never before attained they came down, the mind of the Power Giver breaking the unseen force that had held them at an equal distance from the planet's surface, then letting the pull of the planet drag them down, down, to slow and settle to the planet.

Rack had difficulty understanding the pictures in the minds of the Far Seers. But Beautiful Wings, whose instinctive knowledge of planet fields and pull was inbred, grasped the pictures easily. Together, minds blended, they would be able to follow the exact instructions of the Far Seers. Moreover, throughout the early stages of the soar, they would be in mind contact with Shadow on the Moon. In his mind the wheelings of the worlds were precise pictures and his logic could send the pictures ahead in time to anticipate the exact location of the sister worlds at any given moment. He had come up with a daring theory to save energy. Upon the approach to the sister world the flying establishment would be speeding through space at a huge picture of velocity. Having measured the strength of the power used by Beautiful Wings and other Power Givers in stopping the fall of their own bodies toward the planet, he pictured the force needed to slow the flying establishment with the weight of Rack and Beautiful Wings inside. To stop the motion would cost dearly if Beautiful Wings forced herself directly against the satellite and came to a direct landing. Shadow on the Moon thought it possible to allow the pull of the satellite itself to slow the soar. Rack tried hard to capture the concept, but it was difficult. He left such technicalities to the Far Seers and Power Givers, confident that they were right when they said that the flying establishment should not aim directly at the satellite, but nearby, swinging past to allow the pull of the world to slow the forward motion, curve it into a circle around the satellite. From that point power would be used sparingly to slow the motion and allow the tug of the satellite to bring the establishment down to a site selected by Rack and Beautiful Wings.

Preparations were complete. On a dark night in the low end of the sun circle, with the howling storms lifting all the settled heavy gases into the already toxic atmosphere, the group gathered and listened to a recital of the deaths of the season. There were blank spaces in the thin web of

life force around the continent. Death stalked the world and dampened the anticipation of the great event. The aching knowledge of loss added a sense of urgency to the last-minute activity as Healers stored good air and broth in the flying establishment, placed fresh, healthy Breathers in the tanks, stored the eggs of the Webbers and Juicers in their containers.

Sleepless, Rack lay with his armored hand on the flank of Beautiful Wings. He felt her shift in sleep, heard the sound of her lungs using the good, sweet air. The place was quiet, work at a halt. Through the thin walls he could hear the sigh of the winds. On his scales he could feel the occasional particle that made its way through the resistance of the walls. He wished for the abilities of the Far Seers, so that he could send his mind up beyond the lowering clouds to feel the swing of the worlds.

He considered his life and it was good. He had seen much, done much. His was the greatest adventure ever given to Healer and the fate of his world hung on him. But he was Rack the Healer, young, strong, confident. He did not know fear.

XII

THIS is the Book of Rack the Healer, called the New One, sent back to the minds of the Keepers from a point where the planet is a yellow-purple brightness, round and good and beautiful. These are the thoughts of Rack, sent from space. For my daughter, the Keeper, whose name I do not know, who can store and keep but who can never know me. For those we love, Red Earth and Shadow on the Moon and Gray Body, Far Seers of great knowledge. For those who helped, for Yellow Sky the Power Giver and for our brothers and sisters on the Eastern Continent, whom we greet. Our thoughts travel to them as well as to our homeland, for here, where the planet is a smallness below us, our thoughts spread easily through the clear vastness, the cold, the growing picture of distance.

Know you, my brothers, my sisters, that your force is felt even here. Tender but strong emotions follow us, making us feel the life force, labeling our world as one of the favored of nature, one on which the life force glows brightly.

We are able even now to feel the reassuring warmth of the combined minds of you, Red Earth, and you, Shadow On the Moon, and you, Gray Body. We know at what cost you are sending us your guidance, for the distance is great and the sky is thick with poisons.

And before we pass beyond the strength of our weak powers, beyond that point where our combined sendings are lost to the combined listenings of the best minds

of our world, I, Rack the Healer, presume to speak, to clutter the vaults of the Keepers' minds with my thoughts in the hope that future generations might gain from our experience.

You have seen the deadly yellows and the dark, swirling air. You have, some of you, received the gift of a high soar, have risen beyond the obscuring darkness into light to see the universe with its depths of black and its sparkles of suns. For you I view the scene, sending it to be recorded forever. The roundness of the planet is becoming sharper in outline as we rise. The cold is even now beginning to be felt inside our establishment. I feel it for all. I ruffle my scales, making them receive the direct rays of the sun, feeling its hard particles bounce and send energy into me, feeling the warmth which is not felt in the air of the establishment, but which I use and share with the one who, welded to me flesh on flesh, uses her wondrous mind to lift us, uses my strength to fly. We leave the dying world behind. The night of space is black in the circle of my eyes and the sun a brightness which, without the protection of my outer lids, I cannot endure.

Even as I send and record my poor thoughts alongside those of my betters, I receive and obey the learned thinking of the Far Seers guiding our soar. Now the forces equalize and we float effortlessly above the clouds, which from this vantage point lose their deadliness and are merely beautiful mottles of color, making the planet invisible to our eyes.

Into the cold shadow of the planet we fly and I feel the slowness of my blood and give of my warmth to the differently gifted Power Giver. I am measuring time and when, at the precise moment determined by the mind of Shadow on the Moon, we surge, using all our combined power, I bid you, my world, temporary farewell and send you my love and ask yours in return. For we are not of this world now but from it, in the hostile vastness of space, an emptiness that makes the airless plains of glass seem like paradise.

Ah, to see the world not below, but out there, seemingly close enough to touch. To see it shrink and become a glove of yellowish-purple and to watch the march of the giant winter storms. The air swirls into a circle covering the southern seas, where the Breathers grow. The sun, harsh, unpitying, lashes all, glares, reflects.

And there we see the satellite, our goal. We are pushing toward it, using our power, feeling the drain. We rest, eat, refresh ourselves. And then we push again and I feel the accumulated fat of my system being used, feel myself shrinking—I am the old Rack, trim, hard. Still we push and there is no sensation of speed or movement. We know only by the resistance to our power that

we are moving and by the steadily shrinking planet behind us. We will push for a period of time and then rest.

WE ARE alone and the loneliness is terrible. We know now that life loves life and needs its presence. Experience our loneliness with us and value your fellows. For here is no friendly life glow from the next establishment—only emptiness, a vast void.

And as we drift, moving at a speed which is beyond my meager comprehension, as the minds of our friends grow feeble in the distance, I exult, for surely we shall achieve our goal and bring continued life to our world.

I sing the song of Rack the Healer, called the New One, asking the indulgence of my brothers and sisters, for we are lonely and we are so vast a distance from the glow of life and our homes and even as we trust in the goodness of nature we fear.

I sing of my love, of Beautiful Wings the Power Giver, with whom I have joined in repetition to produce the life of a Keeper, thus contributing to the balance of nature. I sing of her beauty, for she is a Power Giver among Power Givers and blessed with a sense of joy in sharing my love. I sing of our union, for it lasted past the tinting and became deep. I sing of our togetherness as we merge to let me share with her and heal the damages of raw sunlight. I sing of her delicate scales, of flashing colors and her slim legs of strength and her arms of warmth and her pink-tinged gills which remind me of the glory of her tinting. I inscribe her name on the records of our race, to be remembered, for she risked much. She soared into the poison of the winter storms to find me, saving me for herself and for this, for myself and for life.

I sing of Red Earth the Far Seer, who did his duty, which was to attend the ancient laws, thus following nature's design and leading to this. May his life be long with many moments of pleasure with young and beautiful Keepers. To him I entrust my memory, my establishment, my nuggets of hard material—and may he find beauty in them, for beauty is nature's gift to all, not simply to Healers.

I sing of Shadow on the Moon the Far Seer, whose wisdow lifted us, guided us, whose strong mind still comforts us. And of Gray Body the Far Seer, whose doubts made us think and work harder to seek this opportunity to do good for the race. I sing of Yellow Sky the Power Giver and remember gratefully her soars with me and I send her my thanks and my love and a wish for an early tinting and a production of life.

I sing of the cold of space, which slows my thoughts. I sing of the hard sun, which glares and burns and makes ashes gather on my

scales; the cruel sun, from which I shield Beautiful Wings with my stronger body. I sing of the growing sister world with its brightness and shadows. It looms there, waiting, waiting, with its gifts.

I sing, reluctantly, of my doubts. I am weak and I fear and think of finding emptiness.

But should such disaster overtake us weep not for Rack the Healer and Beautiful Wings the Power Giver, for we have enjoyed much and have known the awesome wheelings of the worlds from afar. Think then only that this was a folly of man, not of nature, for the faith is kept as long as the life force is vibrant on our world.

I sing of my hope. I sing of anticipated greetings from brothers and sisters on our sister world in a place of sweet air and plentiful food and undiminished life. I sing of our return to bring hope and word of renewal. I sing, alternately, of loneliness, of two of us alone on a vast world, building life, if that be ordained.

I add my thoughts to those of Rose the Healer, who was young with our race. Rose the Healer said that the bodies of the Old Ones littered the Earth, leading me to think that nature at times can be cruel. I wish I could have seen the world as it was, young, with growing things and multiple forms of life. Perhaps we, at the end of our journey, will find such a place, replenish ourselves, return to you with many secrets. And as I dream, I dream of moving the race to this fresh, new world where no one wants for air and the gentle sun warms even the frail, unprotected hides of the youngest and most tender.

Many questions assault my mind. Will there be a powerful life force on this new world to make me strong enough to soar across the emptiness and carry on my own back all life to this new beginning?

Our Breathers die, but the supply will be ample, for we pass from the pull of the home world to the tug of the new growing steadily ahead of us, and the senses of my love feel it. It is a confirmation of the power of the mind to find that the thoughts of Shadow on the Moon the Far Seer were accurate.

We burn and freeze. My scales coat themselves with ash. It clutters the establishment, is breathed and expelled through our gills.

SADLY I sing of the weakness of my love. For she is used, even with my healing. The strain, as we apply our power to slow ourselves slightly, is felt to the core of my deepest cells, for I have used my reserves and feel my weight go down as we face the pull of the new world.

I will breathe deeply of the air and eat of the broth held in reserve. I will send my strength into her, healing her, bringing her back, for I weep with her wasted substance

and, for the first time, doubt our combined wisdom. For had we not chosen to venture into this vast cold we would be snugly established amid the storms blowing. Selfishly I dream of wasted time, the time allotted to us even with a world dying about us, for we would have lived and blended our minds for our given span. We would have lived the memory of our union and, nature willing, might have been blessed with another.

I recall how in a northern establishment, with the frost sparkling on the earth, we joined. We tinted. She flowered. Her breast buds were tender and sweet and I saw them suckled by our issue, by the Keeper whose name I do not know . . .

Weakened, we near our goal. It is fortunate that we calculated enough stored air, just enough broth, just so many Breathers, for the load has been great and the cold has drained us and ahead is the final surge of power. I rest fitfully. I dream that my love tints, that I tint. I see her scales flowering and see the emergence of the ruby beauty from deep within her.

I dream, waking.

No. She tints. My love tints. In her weakness there is about her lower regions a definite tint and a hint of flowering on the chest. Bless nature. Bless nature. It could only be nature's plan. I will tint. I feel it. I feel the preliminary tinglings. Below, on a new world, we will find a union. It is nature's will.

Sadly I wonder. Are we then to stay, to build a life force on this new world?

We sing and the voices of our minds are weak for traveling far, hopefully to be gathered in by the combined strength of the Far Seers.

We are behind the satellite, hidden from our home planet.

Farewell. Farewell. We will lower now to find our destiny.

XIII

APPENDED to the Book of Rack the New One by Red Earth the Far Seer, my thoughts. The principle of interplanetary soaring is proven and praise is due to the work of all who were involved, but especially to Shadow on the Moon the Far Seer who sensed the movements of the worlds to such an accurate degree that the soar was made within the tolerance of our measurements.

I, Red Earth the Far Seer, now record the time in pictures of sun circles, satellite movements and tilt of the planet. I record the duration of the soar in terms of the rising and falling sun. I record minute cell counts and am amazed. Rack is, truly, the New One, for the expenditure of his substance was beyond the endurance of any Healer.

I record that the foregoing final segment of the Book of Rack the Healer was received by the combined minds of the Far Seers much

as it is recorded, with interpolations by Deep Diver the Healer. These were necessary due to the weakness of the thoughts from far space, received sporadically and sometimes altered by the toxic storms. Yet it is felt that we have preserved the essence of the thoughts of Rack the New One.

We wait. The survival factor allows little outside activity and the food stores dwindle, but there is a new beginning always—and with each new beginning there is hope.

As I wait I record the thoughts that haunt me. I am especially impressed by one of the last clear thoughts received. That tinting was in process is beyond doubt, for the excitement strengthened Rack's thoughts and made them clear. I speculate. Could this mean that nature's plan is to establish life on the new world?

To myself and to the private banks of my Keeper I confess that this is my belief, as indeed it was all along. Old beliefs die hard and all my hope springs up to think that they will return with information, with ways of keeping life on the world. Yet the indications, the tinting, the reported weakness of the Power Giver, all tend to convince me that the new one was born out of nature's design to transplant the seed of life from this dying world to another.

But there is another fear. We received the thought of a clearly visible world. This is strange, for air in all recorded history has been dense with clouds. We know that clouds contain many substances, most of which are of little or no use to life. But what if, in nature's incomprehensible overall plan, those substances that cloud the air serve some small purpose? Would it be possible for life to exist and merge and produce more life in a completely clean-aired world?

I would have breathed easier had there been a report of moderate cloud cover on our sister planet.

I can send out my senses, penetrate the clouds, cover the vast distance to the satellite in a span of time only a tiny picture of the time consumed by the soar. I can then feel the response bouncing back and measure the density of the soil of the satellite and it is soil, rock, solidity. I cannot penetrate to the depths. I cannot detect the presence or lack of air or water or any other substance. I cannot, of course, detect the minute forms of life there, Rack the New One and Beautiful Wings the Power Giver.

I can only wait.

Perhaps, in time, other New Ones may spring forth. We search all the new-born Healers, trying to detect that strange, new area of the brain which gives Rack the New One his ability to merge physically with another. We find nothing. We have sacrificed the best sun circles of the life of a Power Giver to carry a message to our brothers across the sea, telling them of the New One,

warning them to be on the lookout for others.

We wait. We can couple with our Keepers and forget for a short span of time, but there is always the outside, the growing toxicity, the diminishing survival factor. And we wait.

It is more and more evident that the fate of all life on this planet is dependent on the findings of Rack the New One in the distant reaches of space.

REF: F-454-269-1933-B-555

X&A Restriction Code 2
Blink Priority Urgent - Urgent

ORIGIN: U.P.X. *Pharos*, Sector P-232, Capt. Bradley J. Gore Cmmd.

DES: Exploration and Alien Search Headquarters, Sec. 1, Xanthos II, Attention urged High Admiral Jackson G. Sparks.

SUB: III Planet, Life Zone Class Xanthos II sun, sector P-232. Inhabited Humanoid.

N.Y. 30,456, Month 7, Day 14, U.P.X. *Pharos*, Capt. Bradley J. Gore, Cmmd., blink beaconed Chicago class star, position R-77.99, V-23.33, H-1.19, L-99.4, Sector P-232, Tri-Chart Ref. P-232-44. (See attached survey charts.) Short blink Expo. scouts *Pharos* IV and V, beginning Month 7, Day 16 resulted planetary system sighting, A Type, Month 8, Day 10. Star class Xanthos II, III planet life Zone A-I. (Attached survey chart position sun R-80.76, *V-34.45, H-5.99, L-87.53.)*

LIFETYPE: Class I-B Humanoid. C-Scale: Questionable. (See attached Tri-Tape Personal-Personal Capt. Bradley J. Gore to High Admiral Jackson G. Sparks.) Possible T rating T-1 or T-2, possible P-9 or P-10.

QUESTIONABLE RATING EXPLAINED: Non-metal culture, subatomic, but with extensive use biological material formed from extracts two insect forms; durable, radiation resistant, highly flexible use in building, making seldom-worn clothing and utilitarian objects.

PLANETARY CONDITIONS: Scale .99 Oxygen atmosphere, various heavy gases lethal quantities. (See atmo-analysis attached.) Vegetation: limited. Soil Condition: critical. (See agri-analysis attached.) Life Scale: Under study. Technology: Limited production

aforementioned biological building material and liquid all-purpose food extracted from specific algal type sea plant.

LANGUAGE: None. Repeat. None. Communication via telepathic pictures.

POPULATION: Number unknown. Four distinct racial types living in symbiosis.

EXPLANATION ABOVE: Preliminary hypno-contact indicates lack of number system. Thus, questions regarding population answered in incomprehensible picture showing numbers estimated in thousands for population density. Difficulty reconciling pictures from alien minds with number system. (See Tri-Tape, Janti-III Planet Sector P - 232.)

JUSTIFICATION BLINK PRIORITY URGENT-URGENT: Humanoid life endangered by rapidly deteriorating planetary conditions. Oxygen replenishment factor: -.87. Atmospheric life factor: -10.99. Population factor: -4.68.

REC. U.P.X. OFFICER CMMD.: Immediate contact. Transmigration III Planet, Sector P-232, Xanthos II type sun, position R-54.66, V-56.78, H-87.55, L-11.0.

SIGNED: Bradley J. Gore, Capt., Cmmd. U.P.X. *Pharos.*

REF: F-454-269-1933-B-555

X&A Restriction Code 2
Blink Priority Urgent-Urgent

Endorsements Blinkstat Capt. Bradley J. Gore, Cmmd., U.P.X. *Pharos*, Sector P-232, N.Y. 30,456, Month 12, Day 14.

Smith, Adm. Cmmd. Sector P-232: *Affirmative.*

Tarsus, Adm., Cmmd P-Group 4 X&A: *Affirmative.*

Larkins, H. Adm. Hdq. 2 Troup X&A, Pegram IV: *Rec. further study.*

Note: Discretion H. Adm. Larkins, Hdq. 2 Troup X&A, Pegram IV, info. presented representatives civilian board. Results: Inconclusive.

Evers, H. Adm. (R), President Xanthos U.: *Rec. further study.*

Parthin, Avery (Miss), President's Board Applied Humanity, U.P. Central: *Rec. affirmative request Capt. Bradley J. Gore.*

Bragg, Amos, Chm. Board Natural Resources, U.P. Central: *Rec. hearing before Combined Congress, U.P.*

Fulton, Gregory, Asst. Pres. George O. Borne, U.P. Central: *Rec. detailed study planetary conditions.*

REF: F-454-269-1933-B-555

X&A Restriction Code P.
Personal 1-A
Blink Priority Urgent-Urgent
Personal-Personal

ORIGIN: Sector P-232, U.P.X. *Pharos*, Capt. Bradley J. Gore, Cmmd.

DES: Personal-Personal High Adm. Jackson G. Sparks, X&A Hdq. Sect. 1, Xanthos II.

(Transcript verbal content Tri-Tape Personal-Personal Ref: F-454-269-1933-B-555-AX34.)

ADMIRAL, I know this is highly irregular, but you know me from way back. You've always said that I didn't like to follow the system and that is explanation enough, I suppose, for the rank I hold. I like to think I'm a man who dislikes the planetary piles of red tape that have been thrown up around Exploration and Alien Search work.

I know you're already saying, *Same old Brad.* I guess you're right. I've been known to go out on a limb. Remember the time I called a three-buck pass in the championship game between the Academy and Xanthos U? We lost, but it was because some little bastard on the Xanthos team missed his assignment and was in the wrong grid and the ball hit him right in the chest, but then I've always been a high roller, haven't I?

Jack, I'm not used to this type of communication. I don't like looking into those glassy little eyes in front of me. I hope you'll excuse my appearance. I'm just in from planetside.

I really don't know where to start. Maybe I should begin about 75,000 New Years back. I know you're a student of history, but please be patient with me. I remember having to crib from your notes to get ready for the final exams, so my trying to refresh your memory on history is not the idea. I just need to ramble a little until I get this thing straight in my mind.

This is a little more than a lower rank imposing on his superior. You owe me because you're the bastard, if you'll pardon the familiarity, Admiral, who talked me into X&A in the first place when I had my mind set on Intersystem Transport, where the loot is. You turned me on with that summer trip to old Terra II. Damn, my back sits up and aches when I think of the digging we did. Remember? We were camped there on that ruined world beside a river that had been killed and never had the

chance to come back to life. We speculated about what kind of junk they dumped into it—so much of it that the stream still hadn't come back to life a few millennia after the last people had given up trying to revive the world and left it for greener places. We couldn't believe it was possible to kill a planet, but there was the living proof and we decided that it was a phase we went through as a race. I remember how the soil had all been eroded away and how the rock stuck through like bare bones and how there was almost no vegetation.

But Jack, dead as Terra II was, there was life on her. There were crawling things and flying things and there was air, even if it did stink.

I've had a lot of time, during these past few weeks, while that fruity little telepath, Janti, you stuck me with has been lifting the skulls of these poor bastards on this godforsaken little planet, to think and remember what we talked about. We talked about the destiny of the race and we always went back, if you remember, to that big question of who the hell are we?

You're supposed to stop asking that question when you leave the college soph coffee tables, but I think the whole X&A program is just another way of phrasing it. I'm amazed that we are not able to answer the question. Hell, we've been in space for thirty thousand years and we still don't know whether or not we had parents or whether we were just laid out on a flat rock in the sun somewhere.

I'VE been thinking about the way you explained our inability to trace our racial origin. You said that the average man can't even tell you his great-grandfather's name and damn it, you were right. I couldn't tell you mine. You said that it wasn't strange to think that a race might forget or lose track of its origin over some 75,000 N.Y. You laughed at me when I went back to the Academy and started digging into the records to trace my ancestry back a few generations. You said that all the trouble could have been saved if one of my ancestors had taken the trouble to write down the names of his and passed the list down to his kids and so on. But no one thought of that in my family and no one thought of it in the race. We have only some old legends. We came from space. That much is sure. We've done enough work on the home planet, old Terra II—and the name alone is indicative of the fact that there must have been a Terra I—to know that until we came there and unloaded a regular zoo of life on her, she was a barren planet. Life began on Terra II 75,000 N.Y. ago.

And on all the other planets we've settled in 30,000 N.Y. we've found enough life to fill a thimble if we collected all of it.

Now we've hit the jackpot, Jack.

I had to laugh when I filled in that official report. I've done it a hundred times and I've never had anything to write into the life questions other than a few facts about some weird bugs and some crazy plants. And this is a good indication of the fact that I'm not all wrong when I say that there's too much red tape in the program. How many hundreds of sheets of blinkstat paper have been wasted with those blank pages regarding life? How much does it cost to blink a stat from four hundred light-years away down to headquarters?

But that's not the point. The point is, we thought that there would be a time when those blanks regarding life on a new planet would be needed. Or we hoped so.

Man, it sent a chill through me when I inked it in: LIFETYPE: Class 1-B Humanoid. And I can feel the vibrations caused by those words all the way out here. I'll bet my report has been fingered by everyone from old George Borne down to the office boy in X&A Headquarters and I'll bet there are some paranoid types who are messing their pants. I've got a pretty good cross-section of society right here in my own crew and I think I have a good idea of what's going on out there on the home worlds.

I'm telling you this, Jack. These poor bastards on this sad little planet are not the ones who shot up those central galaxy worlds we stew about so much. I've seen those worlds. I've walked the streets of the dead cities. You know and I know that the animals who built those cities were not even vaguely humanoid. The ruined worlds are not the point here. What happened to them has nothing to do with this situation, and I hope you'll keep reminding people of that. We know that those cats there in the thick stars were blood thirsty sons of bitches doing in a few worlds—and, hopefully, themselves—but we've been having nightmares eversince the first X&A ship came back and showed us the pictures and the message they found burned into the skin of one of the planets. We've been quoting it ever since: *Look on this, ye who aspire, and quake. Build not, for we shall return.*

It's enough to give you the creeps, I'll admit. Twenty worlds killed. Up to 200 billions of beings done in. And our quaking isolationists think that every time we go out on a mission we're going to run head-on into the planet killers. You know my views on this. I think they did themselves in, because where the hell are they going to return from? We found nothing to indicate that they had developed anything half as sophisticated as the blink drive and the worlds they inhabited were packed together around five suns in the same neighborhood. We've had ships all over this galaxy and there are just the twenty dead planets out there toward the center behind that big

beautiful grouping of New York type stars. We haven't covered every star system in the galaxy, not by a long shot, but a civilization that could do what they did would be able to detect our ships if they came within four hundred light years, the way a blinking ship sends signals ahead of itself through the continuum. So I'm going to be damned unhappy if you people back there at headquarters let the ogre-hunters delay a decision on this thing until its too late.

I SUPPOSE I wouldn't be surprised if that happened. God knows, I'm not surprised at anything we do. I wouldn't even be surprised if those planet killers came sweeping in from a neighborhood galaxy breathing fire and shooting up worlds. We'd just have to fight 'em. We're not completely without a defense, you know. For 15,000 N.Y. we've been worrying about those dead bastards and we've spent a lot of loot working on weapons we've never had a need for. If they could kill a planet, we had to be able to kill a planet. You know the drift. We bewail their cruelty, but we're not entirely without aggressive tendencies. Our history shows that. So far we've not killed entire worlds, but we sure cut the population when Zede IV came up with that fascist nut who was going to establish an empire. We've got some blood on our hands, too. We go armed. Hell, I've got enough armament aboard an Expo. ship to handle a fleet of those planet killers and shoot up a dozen worlds while doing it. I've never had to use a single popgun and I pray I don't ever have to—but I've got them and I would use them if necessary. I have an antipathy for planet killers. I'd kill a few planets myself to keep them from killing any of ours. Ain't that human logic?

But we've been good boys and girls for a few thousand N.Y. and we haven't killed anyone except in accidents and occasional cases of psychopathic murder or something. We've spread ourselves from asshole to appetite all over this arm of the galaxy and we're breeding as fast as we can to settle more worlds. I think I heard someone say that new world settlement requests come into United Planet Central at the rate of about five a year. We're pretty prolific. There are a hell of a lot of us and we're still suffering from two bugs. One, we're lonely. In our billions, we're all alone. We can't understand why there's no life in this galaxy except us. We're always looking for it and always scared we're going to find it and discover the planet killers. This makes us hope and quake at the same time, being human, but we're curious enough to go on looking. We're so hungry for company we breed our dogs to be almost human and those scientists on Xanthos II breed sea mammals

up to the communication level and go swimming around under the water with them, talking about this amazing intelligent life. Well, I think a lot of people are thinking of Z&A in terms of a search for human dogs.

What if we run into someone out here who is our equal? Not the planet killers, but just a race that can stand up to us intellectually? Will we start shooting, unable to bear the competition?

When that creepy little telepath, Dr. Feli Janti from Belos II, discovered that these poor bastards we've finally run across—these Class 1-B Humanoids—are way the hell and gone ahead of us in certain mental powers he panicked. He wanted me to start shooting. Some of these people can, without a single number, without a bit of math, picture in their heads a quantity of what they call sun circles equivalent to 100,000 of our old years.

This Dr. Felo Janti ran face to face with a guy who could manipulate his cells at the atomic level. Janti got pictures of others who fly or teleport, using some power we can't even measure. He went white. He shook. He turned to me and said, "Captain, I recommend that we sterilize the planet immediately." He made a snap judgment, just like that, from having looked into the mind of one of them. His voice shook. He was scared right out of his bowels. These people don't have a single weapon, offensive or defensive, and their only enemy is the planet itself, but that creep wanted to wipe them out lest they overpower us with their superior mental abilities and rob the women and rape the men or something.

Jack, I know I'm taking up a lot of your time. I know you're damned busy flying that desk and painting scuff spots on the red tape. So I'll get down to it.

WE'VE seen some hell-holes together, Jack. Terra II is a good example of a dead planet. Some of the places we checked out were pretty bad, but all of them are like paradise compared to this one. She's a hot one. She's greenhoused by a thick atmosphere and under it there's a lot of volcanic activity, just as if she'd been split by something down to the mantle. The air is full of sulphur and ammonia and other good jazz like that and the rest of it is inert with just the barest trace of oxygen. The surface is about eight-tenths water, because the heat under that blanket is up to the level where if you tried to take a bath in water that hot you'd burn your tail off. Right on the poles, in the wintertime, there's just a trace of frost. It melts off completely in the summer. There's lots of water, but it's fortunate that these people don't need it, getting theirs from their all-purpose liquid food which comes from a slimy green sea

plant. The potable water is as scarce as it is on any desert planet you can name. The rivers are chemical sewers and the seas are just about as thick as a good *juaro* soup—only they contain everything that is soluble in water. They'd float a piece of steel, almost, they're so saturated. There's not enough soil on the planet to grow a patch of beans and the rock is bare, exposed down to the solid level almost everywhere except in valleys where soil has been trapped. Those low places are something out of a nightmare. They're filled with plants that look like diseased toadstools, although they're unlike anything we've seen because they're as toxic as a Telos red-snake and the soil holds about all the radioactivity that is left on the planet. It limits the stay in a Type-A suit to about ten minutes. That's damned hot. The radioactivity is artificially produced and is all old stuff. Lots of the carbon series. There are enough original radioactives deep down to tell us what happened. There are indications of mining at very deep levels. Yep. That's the story. I didn't put that in my official report and I leave it to you whether or not to break it right now. I'm afraid if I said it I might give the isolationists fodder for their fear-mongering.

The planet has been systematically looted of every resource. On the surface there's not enough metal to get together a good child's toy and indications point to quite a few millennia since anyone has dug for it. We've turned up samples of most of the common stuff, Lead 208 and 206 and a bit of U-235 at the deep levels. On the surface, especially next to the vegetation in the low spots, there's some Strontium 90 and Cesium 137. It gets into the atmosphere at times.

But these are not the planet killers of the central galaxy. I'd stake my career on that, Jack. I may be doing it anyway right now. This planet was killed, all right, but not by those bloody bastards of the center worlds. This one is older. Not in geological formation, but in settlement. You know we shifted our X&A missions to the periphery after we failed to turn up anything in our own neighborhood and after we found the central worlds in ruins and dated them some 75,000 N.Y. old. The planet killers were in their big, final battles just about the time we came from wherever it was we came from. So it stood to reason that we hadn't come from the central galaxy or beyond, or we'd have encountered the killers on the way to old Terra II.

Here's a side thing that might cause the isolationists to shudder. Suppose we'd missed Terra II—and it's a loner, the only life-zone planet in its sector. Then we'd have gone on in and we'd have run head-on into that big war and that would have been the end of us. But we didn't. We hit on the one planet in

a thousand that could give us the proper conditions and then we settled down and started pulling ourselves into space again. It took us a while and that leads me to think that the first ships must have been primitive. It makes me think, sometimes, that Jordan is right in his theory about a one-ship landing. That would explain a lot. If one ship had carried our little zoo out from the mother planet, wherever the hell it is, and if it had been severely damaged on landing—suffering destruction of the history tapes or whatever—we might have the answer. Suppose the survivors were left with nothing but their intelligence. They'd have been so damned busy during the first few generations—rebuilding toward a technological civilization—that they wouldn't have bothered with esthetics like history and where they came from. Word of mouth is a chancy way of preserving fact.

ALL RIGHT. I'm rambling. But it's all connected. It's all about the damnedest bunch of people I've ever imagined. This world is peopled by four distinct racial types. No type is dominant. One type is a moron-intellectual sort of being, female, and the most humanoid in appearance. These moron-intellectual females wouldn't even qualify for a bush league Miss Local Belle contest on the home worlds, but they're definitely humanoids. They're hairless, but they have skin much like ours, only a bit thicker and tougher. They have breasts and most of the other female toys. They grow to adulthood, a bit smaller than the average U.P. female, with their brains remaining at the level of about a six-month-old baby. I've seen one or two of them. They lie in bed, naked, kicking and mewling like infants. But behind that part of the brain that controls their bodily functions is an area which, according to the creep from Belos II, is like a flesh-and-blood computer. These idiot-computer beings can't control that part of the brain, but it's used by another life form. This is a male who lives and works with the idiot female and he's a real-life monster. He doesn't have any eyes. He's got scales like a lizard and a chest about the size of a barrel and his head comes out of his shoulders in a solid, fleshy peak to point into a rounded dome. He's got a small mouth and a hairy, inverted nose through which he breathes.

Oh, I forgot—all four types have one thing in common. They have red gills on their necks. The computer morons look as if the gills haven't been fully formed. The gills have something to do with breathing and the computer morons can't go outside except under ideal conditions. The male types living with the computer morons have the gills on the thick, fleshy portion of the tall dome of head. They see and

hear and apparently smell and do a lot of things our experts are studying—do them with senses much like old-fashioned radar. They can hurt with the power of their minds, but they're gentle. We've observed no attempt to dominate. They can send their senses bouncing off the near planets and— try this one on for size—they can sense the stars. Of course they're not sending signals all the way there and back—the nearest star to their sun is 4+ light-years distant—but they can feel something, maybe the light from the stars as it comes down through an atmosphere which in broad daylight on a summer's day makes it as dark as the inside of a cat's gut. They've got a sense of time, but no written calendar, of course. A sort of abstraction tells them the season, the month—although they have no names for the months, just abstract pictures comparing the time with the entire year and the day in relationship to the entire year.

The two other types are male and female. The female is the flyer. She uses electromagnetic force—in some way that has our boys boggling their minds—to lift herself and a considerable load for fantastic distances. More on that later. Her male counterpart is the worker. He's developed some amazing body functions, including the ability to rebuild damaged cells at the DNA level. And that healing ability allows him to go out into that hell of a planet and gather food. He likes to travel and bugs around over all the land areas and under the seas when he's not working. He can exist in an atmosphere that wouldn't give a good breath of air to an ant. He stores oxygen and nutrition in his cells and uses his reserves at will.

These last two types are the breeders. They breed just once in a lifetime—and by that I mean all that goes with it. Once in a lifetime, Jack. How would you like that?

All four of the types are ugly. The male breeder has huge, thick scales that bounce off radiation and the hard particles from the sun. That in itself is worthy of a lifetime of study by a dozen of our scientists. He has a chest capacity of about four cubic liters. He has eyes, as do the three types other than the radar fellow. The male breeder also has the strongest esthetic sensibilities.

You've got all this if you've read the rather unusual transcript we sent as exhibit number one in this affair. I hope you have read it—and thoroughly—because this whole thing means a lot to me and, I sincerely feel, it means a helluva lot to all of us.

HERE'S this society working together. They never, never, except in rare and isolated cases of severe law-breaking, do any harm to any living thing. They're the dominant form on the planet, but

there's not much else. There's a large, spiderlike thing. Another insect type is about as large as a phralley dog, looks like an ant and makes a fantastic amount of sting fluid. Then there are the half-plant, half-animal creatures, the size of the period dot on a blinkstat typer, which can eat the atmosphere and synthesize oxygen. These little bugs are keeping the race more or less alive.

The people know they're living on a dying planet, but they don't know why it's dying. They have a semi-religion and worship nature as a force for good. Their god is life itself. They think the role of nature is to people worlds with life of an intelligent nature and to them that means people like themselves. But their faith is being tested, because their best minds predict death for the race in about one generation. We think they have plus or minus nine years, N.Y., that is, before the air is gone. We may be slightly underestimating their survival capacity, but it is my considered opinion—and the opinion of my staff—that the situation is urgent. They're going to die. The little oxygen makers they call Breathers are being killed in their natural habitat by a worsening of the sea and air conditions. There isn't any new oxygen being made to speak of. They keep colonies of the Breathers inside their homes, but the Breathers are relatively short-lived and have to have optimum conditions to breed satisfactorily. They decline in captivity, the breeding not keeping pace with the dying. They have to be replenished from the natural supply with much labor and difficulty—and that supply has to be enough for people on two land masses. In plus or minus nine years there ain't gonna be no supply of new Breathers.

For the first time in history we're face to face with an intelligent alien society and it almost makes me believe in their nature worship, because we've come on this at a crucial time and we have the power to help them. We can save them by moving in equipment to manufacture oxygen from the water or the rocks, as we do on some mining planets, but that would cost a bloody fortune and would require contact. Moreover, it would be an endless process, because this world is farther gone than any inhabited planet I've ever seen.

Basically, that's the case, Jack. We help or they die. I hope you haven't made a decision yet, because I'm going to hit you right in the balls with a few facts we've dug up.

One, our archeologists have made test borings and excavations. We have to do this in out-of-the-way places, because it's difficult as hell for our boy wonders from Belos II to sneak up on some of these characters, hold them in hypnosis and then shoot them with

something to keep them in a daze so they won't notice us. Still, while keeping security and not making contact, we've been able to do some interesting things. It's difficult to state anything with much authority, because by our measurements this present society is about as old as we are, about 75,000 New Years. You can imagine how 75,000 N.Y. can raise hell with world subjected to corrosive rains and uncontrolled erosion—and especially one that has been burned good with atomics.

Yep. That's what I said. She was burned bald. Just like the planet killers' leavings. Only these people did it the hard way with old-fashioned atomics, not the goodies the planet killers had. The signs are unmistakable. All the old, decaying isotopes are present. They must have used very funny bombs, because they produced a lot of carbon isotopes with long half-lives.

I know that I'm going to be asked how, if there was enough stuff around 75,000 N.Y. ago to leave this much hot stuff, anyone at all survived to found this new race. Well, I haven't got the answer, only proof that they did survive, because they are here.

I'VE monitored as many interviews as I could. The ones without eyes and ears and with the pointed heads call themselves Far Seers. That's because they can send that radar-like sense out to vast distances. The Far Seers are the priests of the nature thing, explaining with clear logic that nature abhors a vacuum as far as life is concerned. The Far Seers believe that all the far suns they can sense have planets and that those planets swarm with life like themselves.

I've looked into the records of the Far Seers, kept in the back part of the minds of the Keepers, those female moron computers. I know about as much about the history of this race as they themselves know.

Incidentally, Jack, the Far Seers screw the Keepers with astounding frequency. They're very virile cats, but completely sterile, like that creature out of our mythology, the mule. That is their only pleasure, but they're not just dirty old men. The Keepers, also sterile but well developed sexually, enjoy it, too.

That's just an aside, but I think it shows as much as anything that these fellows have basic human traits.

I was talking about looking into the minds of the Keepers. I do it, of course, with the help of the little bastard from Belos II, who can't concentrate, but has to keep looking into my mind to see if I'm having too many wet dreams or something. It's interesting to note that these people are about as foggy about their beginnings as we are about ours. They have some incomplete legends, just as we do. They think they've mutated from a race they call the Old Ones. They

believe that nature adapts life to meet the conditions of a world. They believe that in times of crisis nature comes up with a New One to pull life through. This is like saying that environment shapes life, isn't it? Here on this world it seems to. These people have adapted to conditions that would kill one of us in the time it would take the brain to die from lack of oxygen, while poisoning him in about a dozen different ways in the meantime.

Their legends tell of nature's forming the First Healer. He could live with what they picture as small, hard projectiles: radiation. He apparently did, for the Healer calls on that strange ability of his to repair radiation-damaged cells and his scales bounce off all kinds of radiation in quantities that would kill a horse. His organs don't collect the bad stuff either. They throw it out and vent it, along with the waste gases and unused toxic content of the air, through the gills. So this First Healer came along as a mutation and then bred the Keepers and the Far Seers—breeding with what they call the Old Ones. I'd guess that it was the Old Ones who did in the planet with atomics.

There's a beautiful line in one of their records, a thing in pictures, of course, which is called, roughly, The Book Of Rose the Healer. They don't know what a rose is, but there's this good picture of a rose left in their minds after the conditions that would have produced a rose have been gone for 75,000 N.Y. Rose the Healer said that the Old Ones fornicated even in death, producing the Healers. That sounds rather human, doesn't it? So they fornicated and out came mutations. Instant adaptation. Believe it or not. I suspect the legends condense the process somewhat.

But we have to believe what we see and what we find. We have here a world which, at one time, was highly technologized, to the point of atomics. We've found a few decomposing chunks of metal to indicate that they were working with some advanced alloys of an atomic culture type. We've found a sizable city under the sea. There's not much there and we can't get to it because it's under a few hundred feet of sludge, but it's there. We detect decomposed metals, stone, everything to indicate that it was a real city. It went under, I'd guess, about 75,000 N.Y. ago, either from the melting of the icecaps or from the planetary crust distortion indicated by wide rifts and by the fact the crust is split down close to the molten core in the south of the western hemisphere. I'm using west as they use it.

We've found a few traces of plastics. You'd think we could find more, but 75,000 N.Y. is a good chunk of time and a lot of it must have been burned with the surface stuff. I'm sure that, given time, we'll find some underground deposits that will tell us more. But I

don't want to be a part of any undertaker's group doing an autopsy on this world. I know we don't have enough proof from what I'm coming to, not yet, but I say we have to take the risk and prove our justification later.

So this world was much like some of ours with atomics, the right metals, the suitable plastics. It killed itself. The present race mutated from the original race, which was humanoid, because the forms of the things we can identify by instrument in the sunken city point definitely to a humanoid origin. The question is, who were the Old Ones?

I think I have an answer to that.

YOU know the prescribed approach to a life-zone planet. We came in slowly and carefully, did a lot of instrument work at long range. When we detected no probes from the planet we looked for a base close in and found it on a large, airless satellite. It was perfect. It kept just one face to the planet, as do the satellites of some of our worlds. We came down on the back side and peeked around the horizon with instruments. Nothing doing down there. We went through normal routine. We sent crews around planetside to probe her and measure her. I had come down with a cold and was sacked out with a couple of wonderful drugs making me groggy. Then one of my junior officers who had been surfaceside came in with his ass in an uproar and what he told me made the drug-wooziness leave me like a hangover after a dose of Zarts. I got into a suit and took a jumper around to where one of my crews had just had the hell scared out of it—enough to yell for the old man. The men were all milling around a veritable junkpile.

Yep. We were not the first ones to land on that satellite. Someone had been there ahead of us. Two of those someones were still there.

This, too, is not in the report, Jack. I know, I know. It should have been sent immediately Code 1, but you know and I know that there's nothing that whets the curiosity of an X&A stat clerk like a Code 1 rating. It would have been all over the U.P. But a Personal-Personal thing, that's fairly sacred.

There was this half-dome of semi-opaque material. We could see into it. It was about five feet at the highest point, about the same wide. It had a lock type entry. Inside were these two things. They had huge chests and they had scales. They were lying on a little bed with their arms around each other. They looked as if they were asleep, but we knew they had to be dead, because we were nightside on the satellite and it was colder than hell. There was no air. Our instruments showed no oxygen inside. We thought they might be breathing the inert gases, but we could detect no movement.

We found later, that they were a male and a female of the breeder species. The female had these cute little silvery and gold scales. The male was as horny as any Phebus lizard in any zoo.

The thing that stoned our people was the lack of any propellant device. I mean, you could see through the whole thing and the plastic-like material was soft to the touch. There was nothing in it that we could detect to push it.

I sent for a team. The two inside were obviously dead. It took a few hours to get ready and then I opened the lock. It was a funny thing, that lock. No apparent reason for it to stay locked and it opened easily, but when it was closed the material overlapped itself and formed an airtite seal. Well, after we'd taken all the pictures and measurements our scientists wanted, I went in. As per regulations, I went in with the telepath from Belos II, even though I knew in my mind that there was no chance of contact, since they had to be dead. There was completely dead air in the dome. No oxygen at all. Along the walls, in little tanks, were dead things like tiny flower buds. I was casing the joint when Dr. Janti, creepy little fink that he was, came on with his communicator full blast and almost ruptured my eardrums.

He was yelling, "It's alive. It's alive."

ALL the dead air had evacuated the open lock. I ordered the lock closed and then I told Janti to vent his spare oxygen into the air. We emptied our tanks and suits of all but a reserve. There must have been just enough air in that cold dome finally to give a mouse a full breath, but it was enough for that big fellow with the scales. I'll be damned if he didn't move. I was paralyzed. I won't say I forgot my duty, but I ignored regulations, because here was the first intelligent life we had ever encountered. I wasn't about to bug out of there and let it die. I watched, my hackles rising, as his big, thick, scaled chest heaved and then I got some more oxygen into the dome. We had it filled with good, sweet air. That scaled monster sat up.

"Contact, please, Dr. Janti," I ordered.

The alien was sitting on the little bed looking at us from a set of blue eyes unlike anything I'd ever seen—huge, soft, alive. Think of the eyes of one of those Satina sea nymphs and multiply them four times. He looked at us and the little creep from Belos II went probing into his mind. Meantime, this scaled cat was breathing us down to nothing. His lungs and cells could hold almost all the oxygen we pumped in.

I was watching him. He looked at us. His face wasn't built for expression, being pretty well hidden by scales and his nose being inverted. He made no hostile move. He just

looked, shifted his eyes to Janti and I felt a force in the air. I couldn't put my finger on it. It was just something that came out of him.

Then Janti lost control and started screaming that the alien had to be killed.

He looked down at his female. She wasn't moving. She was dead. I felt this sense of despair so overwhelming that I was sure that the planet killers had made it back and done in all our worlds with all my friends, family, crew, all the girls I'd ever loved, all the sweet grass I'd walked on and sat on, all the good, blue water, all the sweet air, everything. Gone. Gone. I don't have the words to describe the total sadness I felt. I wanted to reach out to him, but Janti was screaming and clawing to get out of the place. He was yelling that the alien had to be killed and that we had to blast the planet before it was too late. I had never realized that Janti was a psychopath. Whose mind can heal the mind-healer's mind? But all the time he had been one of those damned doomsayers and he was sure we'd run into the form of life that would do us all in unless we acted quickly.

In all this turmoil—Janti's letting his mind go ape was affecting even me—the scaled fellow turned, made an animal sound. It came through. It was a sound of pure pain. He put his arms around the female, held her dead body close. He rocked and rocked and it was quiet in the dome, because the good doctor had made his escape, taking all the air out with him.

I pumped it up again. I went out and threatened to smash Janti's faceplate and let in space to boil his blood. Janti recovered his sanity and came back into the dome. He couldn't get any pictures, any communication. I ordered him to contact, breaking every rule in the book. The scaled fellow was closed off tightly and Janti couldn't find a chink. He said the scaled fellow's mind was like a solid, closed ball of steel.

So I had to watch as this alien, this first intelligent being we've met in all our history, died. He held the female close and rocked back and forth. Tears were running down inside my helmet. There was plenty of air in the dome, but the alien wouldn't breathe. He seemed to will himself to death. It took a long, long time and nothing we could do could reach him. We tried contact on various levels. But he was closed. Janti said his mind was the most powerful he had ever encountered. In the end we tried to pump oxygen into his mouth, but he merely voided it from his gills.

HE WAS from the planet, of course. And the way he got to the satellite makes for some of the most incredible stuff I've ever run into, fiction or otherwise. I've told you that the female breeders fly.

Well, when we went planetside, by sheer luck we landed on this fellow's home continent. It's a piece of desolate real estate if I've ever seen one and I've seen a few. The scene wasn't much better than the planet's moon.

Janti and his help made hypnocontact. We had been warned in advance by our encounter with the live one on the moon and it was a good thing. If we had gone in blind those Far Seer types would have sensed us. But we went in hypno and began to dig around. Turns out that the fellow we met on the moon was a hero and their last hope. Everyone knew all about him.

He had been sent to the moon because of their wild belief in nature. They just knew that there was a happy, sweet-aired world up there on their moon. So they sent these damned kids, and I say kids because the life span of a male breeder is about twenty-two N.Y., that of the female breeder even less. She, the female breeder, literally consumes her life substance in flight.

It was possible for those two kids to go to the moon because he had come up with something new. It wasn't a machine or anything like that. It was a mutation. They went to the moon of that planet on the power of the mind, Jack. The Healer—he was called the New One—was a mutant and, able to "blend his flesh" with others. It was somewhat like a blood transfusion, only infinitely more complete, for he could go into the body of the others and heal them, as he healed himself, on the cell level. With his fantastic capacity to store oxygen and energy he had enough, with what food and air they could carry in that dome, to send that whole crazy space ship, and that's what it was, all the way to the satellite.

Don't ask me yet why they didn't freeze. There was no artificial heat in the thing. Our boys think he could stand direct sunlight and diffuse the heat around the dome with his scales or something. At any rate, he had to be exposed to direct sunlight on the satellite—and to the freezing cold. Fantastic tolerance for extremes in temperature. When we found him he came out of his coma unharmed, except for a small ashlike deposit on his scales. The female, on the other hand, had died of a variety of things, apparently, cold, heat, hard radiation, lack of oxygen.

Okay. So these people knew they were done for, that the planet was going to kill all of them. This kid came up with his mutation, which enabled him to drive his space ship all the way to the satellite, using his female's power. They went there expecting to find life and they found airless space and heat and cold and death.

His friends all over the western continent, and even in the eastern areas knew all about the trip. We

were interested in our first alien, naturally, so we traced him through the records in the minds of the Keepers and compiled the stat—the exhibit one in this whole thing.

It's sad, you're thinking. They're all going to be dead in plus or minus nine N.Y. Perhaps you're also saying that so far there is no justification for us to step in. I know that there are isolationists high up in the council of President Borne and they'll agree with Janti that these people could threaten us with their fantastic mental powers. How would we control people who can teleport, send a fatal force from their minds, live under conditions that would kill us in three minutes? I know that a lot of powerful people are going to cite our regulations—no contact until a thorough study has been made. A study which, if carried out according to regulations, would take twenty N.Y.

JACK, we can't let these people die. We've spent a lot of time, energy and resources trying to find exactly what we've found, a civilization of intelligent beings. They're different, but not that different. They're gentle. When we pieced together the account of Rack the Healer from the minds of the Keepers and the others it came out so human that there wasn't one of us who wasn't touched. I like to think that Rack would be pleased with his book. It was taken from a lot of sources and the end of it is not yet written. We found a part of Rack's book in the mind of his infant child, a Keeper. We found more of it in the minds of his friends and their Keepers. I wanted you to read it even before you scanned the official reports, because I think it shows that these are nice people, Jack.

They must be saved. Hell, I'm selfish. I want one of those Far Seers in my crew some day. What an exploration tool he'd be! And a Power Giver to do short range scouting. And a Healer to look around on hell-hole planets where even the best suit is good for limited periods.

I won't guarantee that if we took them into the United Planets they wouldn't be running things in a few hundred years, but we could do worse. They have gentleness, true regard for individual freedom, a reverence for life of any sort.

If they're smarter than we are, then we'll just have to buckle down and learn more. We just can't let them pass out of existence.

As I see it, we have three choices. We can let them die—and we'll do this if the regulations are followed. We can move some or all of them under hypnosis to hide our contact and risk having them go into some kind of shock when they awaken on a totally different planet. Or, we can contact them, explain the whole situation and move them to a nice, fresh planet. It wouldn't even have to be a prime planet. Worlds we

look on as being waste worlds would be paradise to them. They'd live like kings on Terra II, for example.

I am unalterably opposed to the first course of action, I don't favor the second, because we'd be unable to move all of them in time.

To support my third suggestion, immediate and full contact, I have one more item.

I said, earlier, that when I jumped around their moon I found my crew beside a regular junk pile. Then I purposely didn't mention anything but the dome in which the two aliens made the trip from their world to the satellite.

The spot where we found Rack the Healer and his nicely named female was not, obviously, their first landing on the moon. They had made some prior stops. We found Rack's footprints in the lunar dust. That fantastic scaled character could walk around in a complete vacuum, using his stored oxygen. He'd done a lot of exploration and all along he must have known that it was hopeless. He didn't have enough reserves to make it back home. His Breathers had been used up, were dying. His girl must have been dying. But he didn't give up and he found this junkpile I mentioned. He knew, as he died, that he was not the first to make the trip from his planet to his moon, because his landing, his last one, was made alongside a meteorite-pitted, antique contraption that could have been nothing but the jettisoned stage of a combustion rocket.

Yep, there it was. We found others later. But here was the real kick in the backside for us and for Rack. This thing has been there a helluva long time. It's pitted, but it's still intact and identifiable, maybe not to Rack the Healer, but to us. And I wondered, as I looked at it, what he thought. As you know from reading his book, he valued and wondered about the small chunks of metal he found on his planet and then, while he was dying, knowing that his lover was dead, he put his hands—his prints were on the dust on the thing—on a store of metal he must have not been able to believe. A whole junkpile of it. He couldn't have known what it was.

I did. And I thought of you, old buddy, and the talks we used to have about where we came from and about all our speculations —like which direction our ancestors would have taken after they launched us into space? We dreamed about finding them, being welcomed. We would be the long-lost children home from the far stars. We'd be given the benefit of all their advanced wisdom. We'd gain immortality, among other puny things, because a society which, 75,000 N.Y. past, could launch a starship, would have made unbelievable advances.

I'M SORRY I have to kill that dream for you, because, know-

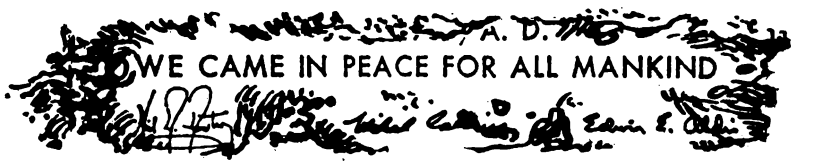
ing you, I'm sure there's a spot somewhere in your aging carcass where that young dream survives. But it's dead, that dream. We killed it when we landed on a barren satellite without a name, just a generic label, moon. It was dead when we found Rack and Beautiful Wings beside a junkpile of antique equipment. I knew it was dead when I stood in front of a crazy, boasting, thoroughly human thing that I'm going to show you in a moment.

But it's not all bad, Jack. It's not all bad. We've been looking for our parents for 30,000 N.Y. and now we've found them. When I looked at Rack, the scaled fellow, I was looking at my cousin a million times removed. Rack and his people are mutated from the Old Ones and the Old Ones went to the moon about 100,000 old years ago. Our old year figures to the minute or so with their sun circle. So 100,000 old years ago, the Old Ones of Rack's world went to the moon. Then they must have discovered better ways to travel, sending our immediate ancestors out into space with what might have been an unguided version of the blink drive, since we landed so far away from this insignificent little sun here in the periphery. After that they lost interest in the barren satellite and then they had their little family squabble that burned the whole world bald.

Here's the picture I've been saving, Jack. As a clue, it's Old English. If you have trouble, consult Parker at the Academy. He's an expert. He's the one who taught me to love the old written language. I didn't have a bit of trouble reading it, except for the dates, of course, which are meaningless. Take a look at it. It was placed here on this planet's moon about 100,000 old years ago, this planet's years, our old years. And I like to think that maybe one of my own, a grandfather thousands of times removed, was among the three listed as crew on the first moon landing. My reason tells me it's a billion-to-one shot, but my intuition tells me maybe he was.

So take a look and think, maybe, that one of them was in your direct line, too, and then send me the order that will do away with the red tape and allow me to save the lives of the few survivors of our mother race.

Take a look:



(Continued from page 117)

(At the current price of single volumes, here is a bargain that makes sense—the two fit tightly together.)

The book is dated in some ways. It was written and first published during the final days of World War II when the concept of "seetee" or "c.t." (contra-terrene) anti-matter was new. Williamson wrote it under the pseudonym of Will Stewart, but he's now out from behind the whiskers. The good guys in this are a bit stiff.

But the problem presented makes up for any flaw the book has. Seetee matter and normal matter are exactly the same, except that seetee has outer positrons and nuclear negative particles. Seetee plus normal matter react together violently, destroying each other completely and releasing total energy.

Bits of seetee are found in the asteroid belt. First problem—detect them: no way is known except by contact with normal matter. Second problem—make use of the power available when you can't possibly handle seetee matter with tools of normal matter.

To add to the complications the asteroid miners discover a "planetoid" that is actually an alien ship made of seetee matter. It's loaded with all kinds of science and gadgets. But how can it be studied and made to work?

The combined novels make for a lot of good, solid reading.

Finally we have a book from outside the field that is worth considering. Fred Mustard Stewart, so far as I know, has never been a science-fiction writer. But his *The Methuseleh Enzyme* (Bantam, $1.50) is one of those borderline cases that I find more science fiction than not. The science is limited, but worked out very well. (Stewart shows every sign of having been sort of a hobbyist and of having become completely fascinated with the subject of life extension; he obviously researched far more than most writers outside the field consider necessary.) The story is that of a small group of people who are permitted to take part in the first attempt to rejuvenate the aged.

It turns out there is a price for such rejuvenation. Some of this price is known to the older characters here from the beginning. The rest is learned the hard way. It makes for a good story.

A red banner on the cover warns you not to reveal the shock ending. Phooey. It's a darned good and logical ending and deserves careful reading—much of the meaning of the book is packed into it. But it's no cheap shocker. It belongs in the book and I was completely satisfied by it. ●

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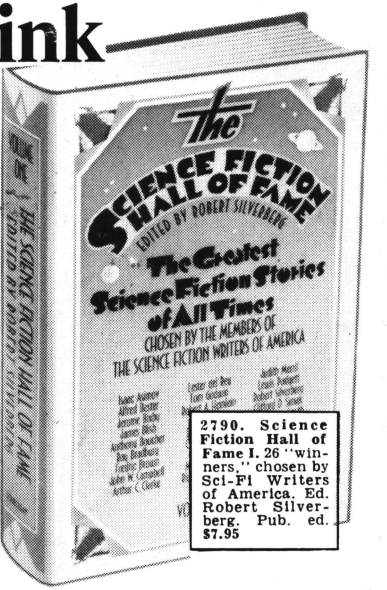

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