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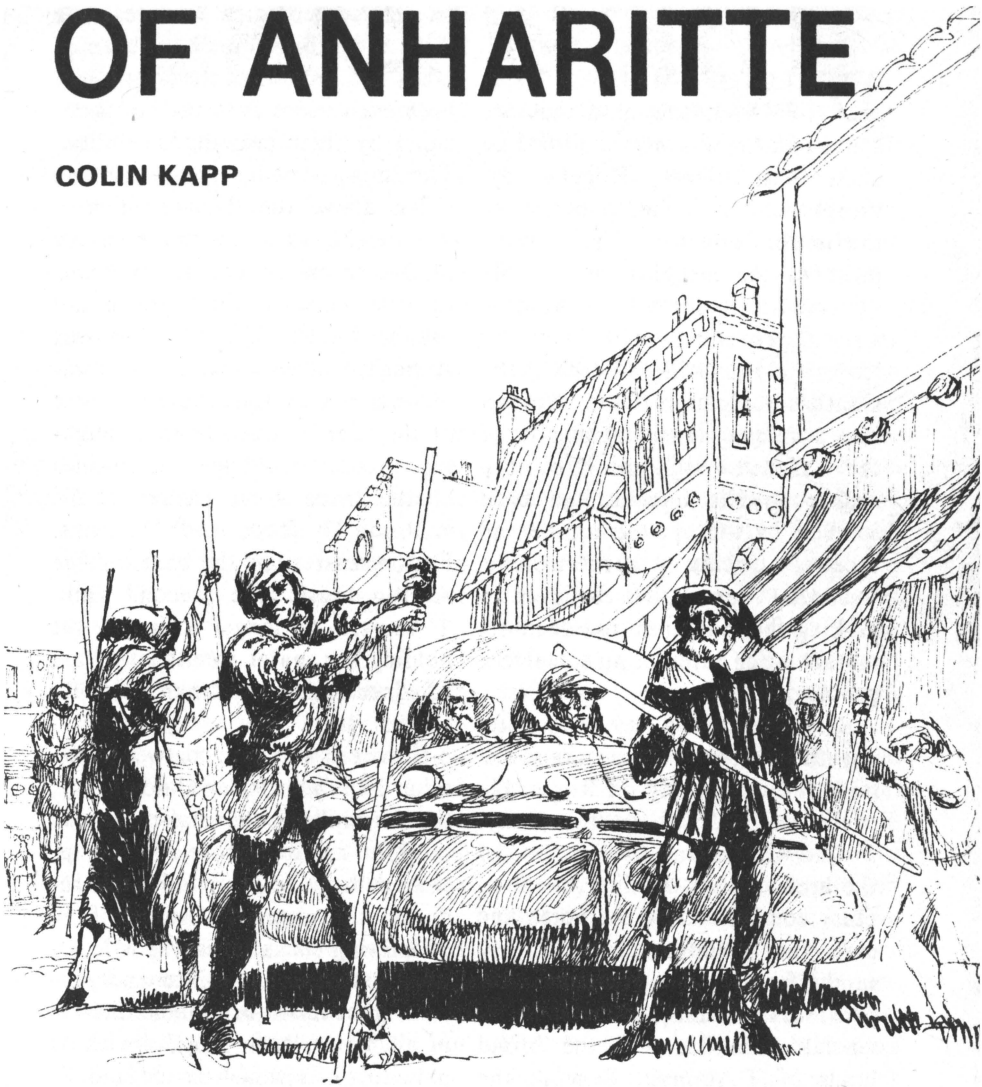
THE WIZARD

What set him apart from other men was that he could not lose!

OF ANHARITTE

COLIN KAPP



Part One

I

DIRECTOR MAGNO VESTEVAAL was glad that the space shuttle was not equipped to enter the planet Roget's atmosphere at the customary maximum velocity. The slower, powered descent gave him ample opportunity to study the terrain he was approaching. His powerful lenses and the facility offered by the shuttle's navigation dome afforded him a unique view of the sector of the planet adjacent to the spaceport. His interest had been kindled by the spacegram he had received, hinting at great trouble. Vestevaal was a firm believer in making the maximum use of information when attempting to solve a problem.

Below him now lay Anharitte, not the largest but certainly the most influential city on Roget. He could see it all with crystal clarity. To the west spread the sea, one of the great oceans dividing the planetary continents. To the north and east the landmass was largely sandy, fertile plains comprising the provinces of T'Empte, Magda, provincial Anharitte and the broad lands of T'Ampere. Beneath the city proper, the beautiful bow of the Aprillo river cut a wide channel through the sandbanks to the sea.

The city of Anharitte was based on natural geological features. The three broad hills must have been islands in a time when the oceans had been even wider than the limits decided by their present disposition. The hills formed a rough triangle rising above the stubborn plains, forcing the waters of the tributary of Daizan and several small canals to pass between their green and granite flanks. The first hill was Anharitte itself, the main commercial and administrative center of the region. Even from a height the director could see the outlines of the three great castles of Di Guaard, Di Rode and Di Irons. Farther east along the banks of the Aprillo rose the second hill, T'Ampere, no longer a citadel, yet holding the major wealth of a vast province under more than adequate control.

Situated roughly between the other hills, yet displaced north, was the third hill. It was smaller than its brethren and even from a height appeared more sinister with the predominating grays and browns of the underlying rocks. This was Magda, key to a minor province and possessing the most formidable fortress of all. It was with Magda, with its paucity of approach roads and its craggy, inhospitable outlines, that the director was most concerned. These lands were the realm of the man known as the *Imaiz*, who, if

the reports were substantiated, posed a considerable threat not only to the composite city of Anharitte, but also to the spaceport and the rich trade therefrom.

At the spaceport there were no formalities. All the details such as the ship's identity and charter, the manifest and the passenger list, had long since been transmitted to the terminal by the shipboard data links and the relevant cargo equipment was already standing at the edge of the landing bowl. As the shuttle completed touchdown procedure, Director Vestevaal strode straight to the small cushion-craft awaiting him. Within minutes he was clear of the limits of the spaceport.

THE cushion-craft bore him along the wide sandy road of the Via Arena, the main trade road leading into Anharitte. In front of him, green and mellow in the sun, stood the broad bulk of Firsthill, bearing on its right-hand shoulder the dominating battlements of the Castle Di Guaard frowning down on the reaches of the great Aprillo river. Slightly farther away and to the left, the darker shades of Thirdhill—the lands of Magda—rose in a dark and rather sinister contrast. It was not possible for Vestevaal to see the castle of Magda from his present location, but somewhere on those strange, broken heights was the fortress home of the *Imaiz*, the wizard of Anharitte, whose activities had fetched Magno Vestevaal unwillingly halfway across the universe.

Some three and a half kilometers along the Via Arena he came to the Black Rock. This marked the limit for the free use of cushion-craft. From this point on he had to—by city ordinance—engage some stave-bearers whose poles would guide the craft safely through the populated streets. Because the vehicle had no positive contact with the roadway it was subject to deflection by winds and gradients. Within the city limits the stave-bearers would run alongside, driving their staves occasionally into the soft undersand and forcing the fenders of the craft to run along the iron-tipped poles, thus defining and correcting the course of the floating vehicle. Progress was necessarily slow and laborious, but since power-driven wheeled vehicles were not allowed on the three hills, the visitor had no choice but to suffer it or to walk.

Just past the Arena a ragged runner, sent by the Company's agent, Tito Ren, met them and trotted ahead to guide them up the slopes of the Trade Road and through the crowded ways to the food market of Firsthill where Ren had an office. The agent paid the men off quickly,

ordered house servants to collect the luggage and ushered the director into the welcome coolness of the office chambers.

While he was waiting for Vestevaal to complete his ablutions Tito Ren watched continually out of the window that overlooked the food market, as if he were waiting for someone to appear. A half-hour later the director was refreshed and ready. He laid the spacegram purposefully on the table.

"Well, Tito, you've fetched me a long way at a most inopportune time. Whatever you have to say had better be good."

Ren turned away from his vantage point at the window.

"It will be," he said. "But the best way I can approach the intricacies of the situation is to start by showing you something. Unfortunately the time is yet a little early. Please take some wine."

"If this is a fool's errand—" Vestevaal said ominously. He did not bother to complete the sentence. He knew Ren as one of the most shrewd and efficient agents in the Company, and the long-standing association between the two men had bred a mutual trust and respect. Grumbling into his beard, Vestevaal accepted wine and came and stood by the window looking out at the busy, colorful market.

"How long have we to wait for this great happening?" he asked.

Ren shrugged. "She would normally be here by now. But I suspect the coming of your cushion-craft will have stirred things up a bit. The one thing you can rely on in Anharitte is that every third man is a spy."

"And every third woman?" asked Vestevaal mischievously.

Ren shook his head. "The women count for almost nothing in Anharitte. Except one—and that's the one we're waiting for."

FINALLY becoming bored with the scene, the director turned away and began to explore the chambers. Ren remained obstinately at the window. Then a cry from the agent brought Vestevaal hastily back to follow Ren's indicating finger.

"Here's what I was waiting to show you, Director. Do you see that girl down there?"

"The tall one in the orange dress?"

"That's Zinder—a bondslave of the Castle Magda on Thirdhill. She comes to the market daily, shopping for the *Imaiz*."

"For a bondslave she's remarkably well dressed."

"For a bondslave she's remarkable in too many ways." Ren turned back into the room to face Vestevaal. "Notice how the traders

treat her. Almost with deference. She may be a slave, but there's none who would dare molest her. There's not a beggar or a bondsman on the three hills who wouldn't come to her defense—even at the risk of his life."

Magno Vestevaal scowled. "Remarkable. It shows a degree of social unity I'd not have expected in such a feudal setup."

"Great currents are at work here," said Ren. "But they run deep. To measure their pulse needs a careful finger. It wouldn't be naive to say that Zinder somehow represents what the *Ahhn* as a race hope to become."

"A bondslave?" The director was perplexed.

"Yes, but what a bondslave! Study her carefully. Look at every detail about her—polished to perfection. Notice the dignity in the way she walks. That poise comes from confidence. And the confidence comes from thorough training and education."

"I don't see why you're making so much of her," said Vestevaal with a trace of irritation. "Many people groom their pets. I assume a slave girl in Anharitte is a legitimate part of a man's harem."

"A slavemaster's control is absolute, including control of life and death," confirmed Ren. "But I don't think you quite understood me. I said training and education."

"But you don't educate slaves—not beyond what's necessary for them to perform their duties," objected the director.

"Then one needs to speculate on just what Zinder's duties are. We haven't yet found the full measure of her abilities. She's proficient in all thirteen space languages, is apparently gifted in music and arts and has a scientific knowledge that would probably qualify her for two or three degrees at a Terran university."

"Fantastic," said Magno Vestevaal, when the implications had sunk home. He moved the curtain to gain a further look at the tall dark *Ahhn* girl who moved like a queen around the market. "How do you know so much about her, Tito?"

"I paid good Company money to the Society of Pointed Tails to have her investigated. They devised many tests of her knowledge and aptitude by way of commerce and conversation. They were more than impressed by what they found."

"How much confidence do you have in the society's report?"

"Every confidence. In Anharitte, a society must keep perfect faith with its patron. A society can refuse to accept any assignment—and frequently does to avoid conflict of interests—but once an assignment

is accepted its terms and conditions become binding on its members even to the point of death. That's clan law, and its enforcement is savage."

"Accepting that for the moment, perhaps you'd explain why you felt it necessary to spend Company money investigating a slave girl?"

Ren cleared his throat. "Anharitte is a freeport not only for Roget but for all ship trade spaceward into the Hub. As a space-commerce base it is priceless. The vast fortunes of the space combines and the merchant worlds have been possible very largely because of the facility offered by Anharitte as a Freetrade exchange. Make no mistake, Director, our own Company could not exist without commercial access to Anharitte."

"I'm more aware of the fact than you are," said Vestevaal, "or I would not be here now. What disturbs me is your implication that our access to Anharitte is at risk."

"I see it this way," said Ren. "Anharitte is unique in having maintained its long-term social stability in spite of having been exposed to space commerce. There have been a few other freeports, but all have succumbed to the disadvantage of their planetary governments, requiring a disproportionate share of the value of the merchandise being shuttled through their territory. Anharitte is different—the tolls and levies remain nominal because they're shared only by the five aristocratic Houses: those of the Lords Di Irons, Di Rode, Di Guaard and by the Lady T'Ampere—and by the House of Magda. The influence of these few has maintained a rigid social structure—albeit one with a slave base—which has given the necessary stability to Anharitte."

"True," said Vestevaal. "And it pays the lords very handsomely to maintain things just as they are. So I don't see what the problem is."

"The *Imaiz* of Magda is rocking the boat," said Ren.

"What makes you think that?"

"Director—have you any idea what happens to a slave base culture when somebody starts educating slaves to Terran graduate standard?"

"You've made your point," said Vestevaal heavily. "Your culture goes unstable. It becomes contaminated with ideas like democracy, civil liberty and other corrosive notions. And finally it disintegrates."

"And from the ruins somebody builds a so-called brave new order—which is inherently more expensive for freetraders."

"Which is inherently ruinous for freetraders," corrected Magno Vestevaal. "You were perfectly right to call me in, Tito. This could be the

biggest threat to trade since the dissolution of the Omanite empire. And you're perfectly sure that the House of Magda is responsible?"

"There's no doubt of it. It's entirely the work of the *Imaiz.*"

"How is the *Imaiz* different from the other lords of Anharitte?"

"I think the clue lies in the word *Imaiz* itself. This translates variously as wizard, wise man or madman, depending on which *Ahha* dialect you speak. The suggestion is that the *Imaiz* is accorded the full rights of nobility because his magic is too potent to be ignored. The House of Magda has a long history of congenital insanity among its occupants—a not surprising situation when you consider the close in-breeding that used to take place in aristocratic houses in order to keep the right of succession within a very narrow group.

"The persistent mental aberrations of the rulers of Magda, usually a form of extreme megalomania, have given rise to many long-standing superstitions about the master of the fortress of Thirdhill. One of these is that the *Imaiz* has the ability to cast spells and control the future. History seems to show that few of Magda's occupants were very proficient in the black arts, for all the cruel and ingenious black rites they devised. But the present *Imaiz* appears to be

a different proposition altogether."

"You're surely not suggesting that he actually is proficient in the black arts?"

"No. And neither is he mad. I've a different and more dangerous picture of the current Imaiz, Diondaizan. All the evidence points to the fact that he's cunning, ruthless, academic—and probably of Terran origin."

"The devil!" said Vestevaal. "I thought that outworlders weren't permitted to hold land titles on Roget."

"They aren't. There's some sort of subterfuge at work here. But the fact that he's succeeded in becoming a holder is a measure of the man we're up against."

II

"ON WHAT sort of evidence do you base your conjecture that he's a Terran," asked Vestevaal. "You've surely not been able to study the man himself?"

"No. We've had to content ourselves with observing Zinder. She's genuine *Ahhn* stock—but there's no academy on Roget that could give her the type of education she possesses."

"But that still leaves the possibility of the *Imaiz* being from one of the other prime worlds."

"True," admitted Ren. "But the Society of Pointed Tails is thorough in investigating such matters. During their inquires they uncovered a most significant fact. When calculating, Zinder works in decimals to the base ten—then converts the answers to the galactic duodecimal system."

"That's nothing special," said Magno Vestevaal. "I do the same myself."

"My point entirely, Director. Your primary education was on Terra and you can't get out of the habit. Whoever trained Zinder had a similar habit. And Terra's the only planet in the universe that still clings to the base ten."

"Point taken, Tito. Your efficiency does you credit. It won't go unrewarded, I promise you. But it does look as though there's a hell of a storm brewing for Freetrade on Anharitte. From your observations, does this look like part of a deliberate takeover by the House of Magda?"

"No. Far worse than that. It looks like interference with the social structure by an inveterate do-gooder more interested in the welfare of the bottom four-fifths of the population than he is in legitimate profit."

" 'Curse all saviours of the human race—for they are responsible for most of the blacker parts of history!' " quoted Veste-

vaal despondently. He moved back to the window and began to watch the tall slave girl again, now examining her every movement with a wiser interest. "Damn it, Tito, you know we can't let this happen, don't you?"

"I know it," said Ren. "That's the reason I called you in. I want permission, financing and backing to organize an opporition to the *Imaiz.*"

"Interference with the internal politics of an independent planet is an extremely dangerous business."

"But it wouldn't be the first time it has been done. Nor is what I propose strictly interference. It could rather be viewed as assistance in maintaining the existing balance of power. The Lords Di Rode and Di Guaard and the Lady T'Ampere are scarcely going to side with the *Imaiz* and risk their income if not their lives if a revolution comes. Di Irons is the city prefect. He's a bit of an unknown quantity in this, but he's responsible for law and order, so I doubt if he'll reject our assistance in maintaining the *status quo.* Most of the societies grow fat under the present regime, so they're not going to welcome change either. And I'm sure the planetary government would love to have us thwart a provincial uprising for them—if it were done with discretion. That puts the major percentage of wealth, influence and interests on our side. Give me the facilities and I'll crush the *Imaiz* without leaving even a ripple on the surface."

"Not so fast, Tito. We're not the only Company affected—or even the largest. And we've the merchant worlds to consider. Before we take any action that might affect the future of Anharitte as a freeport we're going to need the approval of the Freetrade Council—most particularly as insurance in case the venture goes sour on us. And before I dare approach the council I have to be absolutely certain that what you've told me is the truth. Not that I'm doubting you, of course, but it would be embarrassing if we were being manipulated into doing the dirty work for somebody who had a simple grudge against the *Imaiz.*"

"I appreciate your caution. If you wish I'll arrange for the senior scribes of the Society of Pointed Tails to meet you so that you can question them directly."

"No need for that," said Magno Vestevaal. "I think I can satisfy myself more easily." He moved toward the door.

"What had you in mind?" Ren rose to follow him.

"I'm going downstairs, of course. To have a word with Zinder."

Ren's eyebrows rose. "I wouldn't

advise it. And for God's sake—remember she's well protected."

"It was the truth of that proposition I wished to test. If that fact holds true, then the rest of the story holds true."

Tito Ren sighed and reached for his sword belt. He paused only to fasten the ornate buckle before he followed the director out into the street.

THE emergence of the two outworlders into the brilliant sunshine at the edge of the square—the director purposefully striding towards Zinder, and Ren following—caused an immediate thrill of interest to run through the market place. There was a quieting in the pace of the bargaining, though each man pretended still to be about his business. The agent sensed rather than saw the evasive group of figures who moved to strategic positions in the crowd, prepared for trouble. Worst of all was the unspoken wariness of the merchants, traditionally neutral in political affairs. If Vestevaal forced the incident into an affray, then even the dour men of small commerce seemed likely to side with Zinder.

Ren normally had complete confidence in Vestevaal's ability to contain a crisis. However, Ren was from habit more attuned to the local undercurrents in Anharitte than Vestevaal could be. Purely from lack of "feel" of the situation the director might provoke an explosive incident. Under his tunic Ren could feel the comforting weight of his blaster. He would hesitate to use the weapon in such a populated place, but, if necessity demanded, he could drop a dozen men with a single charge.

"You there! Girl—come here." Vestevaal was approaching Zinder, calling imperiously. She turned her head and waited for him, her face composed, as if the meeting were an event not unexpected.

The director stopped suddenly as he realized she intended that he must be the one to walk the intervening distance if he wished to speak with her. She plainly did not propose to come to him.

"I said come," said Vestevaal, knowing the delicate dictates of slave etiquette.

She looked him up and down with shrewd appraisal, then turned back to the merchant at whose stall she was and continued her transaction. The director sensed that all eyes were upon him and wondered how he would resolve the offered slight. It was unthinkable for any slave other than Zinder to have disobeyed a public command from a man so obviously a prominent outworlder. Vestevaal realized that he

had trapped himself into an open contest of wills. He could not afford to let the matter pass.

He strode angrily across the remaining distance and caught hold of her left wrist, on which the slave mark was indelibly written. At close quarters she was attractive rather than beautiful in the classic sense. Her dark hair framed a strong face, which displayed an unassailable character. But more impressive was the rich by-play of emotions continuously monitored in her eyes.

"I thought so—the House of Magda." Vestevaal was emphasizing the aspect of bondage, trying to draw a reaction. "Your master will be hearing from me. You're the one they call Zinder, aren't you?"

"But of course, Director Vestevaal. But then you knew that before you came across here. Indeed, I am the reason you came." Her voice was clear and melodious, modulated with a subtle artistry. Her speech was perfectly articulated Terran in which the attractive lilt of the native *Ahhn* accent had been carefully preserved. "But I'm glad you did come. Peering from behind a curtain is rather undignified for a man of your standing with the Freetrade Council."

"Damn!" said Vestevaal, knowing that he was now the center of an attentive audience. "You take much on yourself, girl. Not only do you open wounds, but you also apply salt."

"Salt? Only to the wounds of enemies," she answered easily. "Among friends salt is for sharing at table. If I've offered salt, Director, it's you who have chosen how to use it."

IN HER deep eyes was no fear or displeasure, only an engaging challenge. Behind the eyes were limitless funds of resourcefulness. Though her lips were smiling slightly, they showed neither insolence nor arrogance. She was meeting him on an equal level and both of them knew it. What had started as a deliberate confrontation had ended in a rout for Vestevaal. His wry smile of admiration turned into a great gust of laughter and he reached this time for her right hand and kissed it.

"As you so rightly said, Zinder, it was I who chose how to use the salt. But whereas a man can mostly choose his friends, circumstances choose his enemies for him. There are times when one could wish the reverse. Please present my compliments to the *Imaiz*—and tell him that if ever he wishes to dispose of your bond he will find in myself an eager purchaser."

"I will convey your words to

Dion-daizan. I'm sure he'll be both amused and flattered."

"And also tell him that I mean to stop him by every means at my disposal."

"That isn't news, Director Vestevaal. Had he not been convinced of it he would not have bothered sending me here today."

"He anticipated this meeting?"

"The chance of this or something like it was highly probable. He felt it only fair you should know the character of the opposition."

"He could scarcely have made the point more strongly."

"What else would you expect of the wizard of Anharitte?"

She bowed respectfully and moved away like a colorful flower among the stalls, the barest hint of triumph on her lips. The tension that had held the cluttered market in a long hiatus drained slowly away and the noisy chatter of bargaining returned. Ren, who had been silent to this moment, moved to the director's elbow.

"I told you I didn't advise it," he said critically.

"You were right, Tito," Magno Vestevaal told him. "I should have listened to you more carefully. Mark that round to the credit of the *Imaiz*. If that's a sample of his tactics we'll be needing more than moral support from the Freetrade Council."

"Then you're satisfied with my assessment of the situation?"

"Send word to have the shuttle readied for blast-off as soon as I reach it. I'll be calling an emergency session of the council and asking for their backing with all the facilities we need. With the evidence I shall give them I doubt there will even be a debate. In the meantime, you're in charge here. You have my authority to draw whatever Company funds you need. Stop the *Imaiz*, neutralize his policy or just plain kill him—I don't mind which. But if he turns many more slaves like Zinder loose in Anharitte we're surely going to have another democracy on our hands. And what will become of Freetrade then?"

III

TO UNDERSTAND the function of the societies in Anharitte it was necessary to view them against the background of the uneasy truce local feudalism maintained. The burgeoning space technology barely thrust outside the city's limits. Almost alone among the institutions of Anharitte, the societies had been forced to adapt to the twin pressures and now formed a precarious link at once joining and keeping separate the rival ways of life.

Historically the societies had been clans of skilled mercenary soldiers who offered their services to any who found it beneficial to use hired arms rather than maintain their own forces. In either attacking or defensive roles, the clans had played a great part in the early formation of the "kingdoms" from which the great Houses of Roget had emerged after the adoption of central government.

With the coming of less turbulent times the societies had found new exercise for their warlike crafts. When the thriving communities had outgrown the protection afforded by the great castles on the three hills, the merchants outside the citadels had become exposed to attacks by Tyrene pirates who came up the broad Aprillo river. Many merchants had then found it expedient to use the armed services of the societies to protect their homes and warehouses. From this had evolved the contract system whereby a merchant engaged a society for protection but paid for the service only as and when it was required. This function, too, sharpened the efficiency of the societies themselves, because the best protection contracts went to the clans with the proven ability to preserve the life and wealth of their patrons.

As piracy became a less profitable profession, the idea of

contract protection remained. Always adaptable, the societies were swift to monitor the change and quick to evolve new services to offer. Slave control in the expanding estates was an obvious extension. The passing of two disastrous plagues brought about the introduction of society hospitals. Frequent fires in the huddled wooden buildings caused the initiation of society fire services. Thus the outworld concept of insurance found a more personal and practical analogue in Anharitte.

Yet the warrior function of the societies was not forgotten. A man with the price might still arrange for the skilled disposal of his rival or the waging of a feud with an enemy. While the taking of life in Anharitte was not necessarily a crime, disturbance of the peace of the city was an offense. The societies learned to conduct their affairs with great discretion under the grim and scowling eyes of a prefecture which neither approved nor disapproved of what they did—provided the quiet life of the city was maintained.

The coming of the spaceport had further enhanced the societies' role. No outworlders were permitted to hold property titles on Roget—a necessary precaution for a culture intending to preserve its own identity in the face of commercial outworld interests—but there was nothing to stop outworlders entering into contracts with a society and leasing buildings held in the society's name. The same applied to slave-bonds and to every other form of transaction that had to be registered with the prefecture. Thus the societies, inextricably part of the old culture, became also the bridgehead of the new.

As a Company agent more astute than most, Tito Ren had long since learned the value of an in-depth study both of the history and the cultural mores of the territories to which he was assigned. Thus he had been quick to recognize the multiple role of the societies and equally quick to adapt the system to his own requirements. His researches had shown the Society of Pointed Tails to be not only the most efficient of the available clans, but also the one still most proficient in the use of arms in situations where the rudimentary laws of Roget could not be bent sufficiently to gain the necessary advantage for an ambitious freetrader.

Ren had wooed the members of Pointed Tails by concentrating his considerable leasings of property, services and local labor with them. He pursued his advantage by offering them well-paid investigation assignments probing those aspects of life in Anharitte he found of

interest. Now he was ready to move into the next phase—that of actually using the Pointed Tails as an instrument with which to manipulate particular elements of Anharitte society itself. He was prepared to recognize, however, that a society as competent as the Pointed Tails would not be likely to accept his propositions without question. Nor was he wrong.

CATUUL GRAS, senior scribe of the Society of Pointed Tails, looked questioningly at Ren.

"You've already spoken with your director, then?"

"I have—and he's in complete agreement. The *Imaiz* will have to be stopped. The director has already given me access to whatever Company funds I need in order to make a preliminary approach to you—and now he has gone to consult with the Freetrade Council. If they concur, I'll have unlimited funding from the Galactic Bank itself and whatever additional facilities I choose to call on."

"And you wish the Pointed Tails to prepare a scheme of harassment and feud against Dion-daizan?"

"I need more than a feud. I need to crush Dion-daizan. Harassment may have its place—but if it doesn't bring results I'm prepared to consider anything short of full-scale warfare."

"And the Prefect Di Irons? Do you think he's going to sit by happily while you wage war on the *Imaiz?*"

"I intend to seek the support of all the lords of Anharitte, Di Irons among them. If we can gain their backing plus that of the Freetrade Council, the *Imaiz* won't stand a chance."

Catuul, his brilliant robes flowing about his muscled body, took a pensive turn around Ren's book-lined chamber. He was obviously not enthusiastic.

"I think you oversimplify about the lords," he said. "Di Irons will never support you in an overt act of war against the *Imaiz*, whatever his private sympathies. Di Guaard is so insane he's still holding an inquisition to find pirates who became extinct two generations ago. Di Rode will listen to you, but he's unlikely actively to support an outworlder against another House of Anharitte. Only the Lady T'Ampere appears as a possible ally—though I doubt you'd be prepared to pay her price for the alliance."

"And the Society of Pointed Tails?" asken Ren. "Will they support me?"

Catuul frowned. "I can't anticipate the decision of my fellow scribes. I'll call an immediate meeting of the lodge and recom-

mend they take your assignment. But there will be much argument."

"What's there to argue about?"

"About the possibility of losing the fight. It's easy enough for you to wave money and say you want to crush the *Imaiz*. But did you never think that Dion-daizan may prove powerful enough to crush the lot of us?"

"That isn't possible," said Ren. "Because whatever strengths he has, I can call on resources to match his ten times over. This is one fight you can't possibly lose."

"Your thinking is typical of an outworlder's," said Catuul. "You don't appreciate Dion's considerable influence with the bond-slaves—or his command of magic. Believe me, you under-estimate his potential, or you would not so lightly engage in plans for his destruction."

"Dion-daizan is a fraud. He's a Terran adventurer—with no more occult powers than you or I."

Catuul shrugged. "Call him by any name you like. We know him as a formidable and unforgiving enemy. He never allows an injury to pass unavenged."

"I can always approach another society if the Pointed Tails have cowards among their members," said Ren coldly.

"Cowards?" Catuul swung on him angrily. There are none braver or more dedicated than the Pointed Tails. It isn't they who might falter—but you."

"I?" Ren was perplexed.

"Of course. If the society accepts your assignment every man is committed to the death. But you have the option to rescind the contract at any time. If the going gets too rough you can retreat offworld to lick your wounds and total up your losses. But we can't. We have to continue operating here in Anharitte—and the *Imaiz* makes no distinction between those who are paid to injure him and those who do the paying. Only the scrolls tell of the remains of societies who once tangled with the *Imaiz* and lost."

"Nevertheless," said Ren, "that isn't going to happen. If ever I drew back, the Freetrade Council would replace me with another. They can't afford to do otherwise. And their resources have no limit—they can acquire them a thousand times faster than we can exhaust them. I'm offering you the backing of a dozen merchant worlds and seven hundred space companies and combines—to fight one man and a handful of slaves. Tell that to the other scribes and see if they share your doubts."

"I'll tell them," said Catuul gravely, gathering his robe across his arm. "And I think they'll be convinced. But it will be a close de-

cision. I'll let you have our answer in the morning."

WHEN Catuul had departed Ren turned his attention to the radio link with the space terminal. From the spaceport the powerful FTL communications equipment reached out in real time to the relay chains across the vastnesses of commercial interstellar space. In response to his inquiry he learned that an incoming call from Freetrade Central was already logged a mere five hours away. Finally Vestevaal's voice came through.

"Tito, can you hear me clearly?"

"Yes, Director. Transmission is good. Did the council meeting go in your favor?"

"It did indeed. They were even more perturbed than we—especially those who have big investments nearer the Rim. The outcome is that we've got all the support we need. The Galactic Bank will give you unrestricted credit. Any Freetrade ships calling at Anharitte will be obliged to offer assistance—and the merchant worlds of Combien and Rance are donating a light battle cruiser to be set down on Anharitte for the duration of the exercise. The battle cruiser will have most of the facilities you might require in the way of laboratories, trained commandos, communications, armaments and the like. You've enough there to start a war if you should need to."

"It mustn't come to that," said Ren. "If we upset the planetary government we'll be thrown off Roget for sure. Our best chance is to try to woo the local lords to our side, then to fight an undercover campaign against the *Imaiz*. Then we can divide Magda's share of the spaceport royalties among the remaining Houses and expect the dust to settle pretty fast."

"You're the man on the spot, Tito, so it's your advice that counts. I'll be returning to Roget shortly, but purely as an observer and to maintain liaison with the Freetrade Council. I may advise on policy, but the strategy and conduct of the battle will be entirely your affair. I hope that arrangement is to your liking."

"I couldn't have asked for better. Terran or no Terran, if we have modern weapons and the support of the other lords, the *Imaiz* hasn't got a chance."

"I wish I completely shared your confidence," said Magno Vestevaal, signing off. "But Zinder didn't have to make that confrontation in the market. For the moment I almost wondered if the *Imaiz* wasn't spoiling for a fight.

CATUUL GRAS came back the next morning with the Pointed Tails' acceptance of the offer. The price was high, but Ren brushed aside the financial considerations. "You managed to find agreement, then?"

Catuul grimaced. "Some of the scribes had reservations, but they're all alarmed by what the *Imaiz* is doing. Certainly they respond to your argument that if we're to maintain things in Anharitte as they now stand, some form of action is necessary to curtail Diondaizan. The fact that you're willing to finance and supply backing for the skirmish makes it easier for us to do what we should finally have been forced to do anyway. In some ways this is an alliance—and there are other societies who may contribute to our cause."

Ren held out his hand in acceptance of the bargain. "Then it's settled. The *Imaiz* will be stopped."

"He will be. But initially we must proceed by customary feud and harassment. Only if these measures aren't effective can we consider outright war."

"I'll accept that," said Ren. "You start to prepare a campaign against the *Imaiz*. I'll do some preliminary canvassing for support among the other lords. I suggest we meet again in two days time to decide our plan of action."

AS REN left his office he was at once aware of being observed. He had not gone far through the quaint and narrow streets before a prefecture watchman approached him.

"Agent Ren?"

"The same." The watchman had obviously been waiting for him to emerge. "What services can I offer?"

"If you please, you will accompany me to the prefecture. Lord Di Irons wishes to speak with you."

"And I with him," said Ren, though he recognized the summons for the imperious demand that it was. If he had thought of declining the invitation the appearance of two more watchmen behind him pointed up the wisdom of cheerful compliance.

Even in the bright sun the prefecture looked cold and uninviting. The wide portals shaded the exterior brilliance quickly into a dim chill that seemed resident in the very fabric of the building. Tito Ren could not repress a shiver as he entered the main door. The stone corridors of the law were always an anathema to him.

Di Irons' office was large and grimly impressive. On the same scale was the man himself. Huge, bearded, and with a shock of rust-red, unruly hair, he was as unlike the typical *Ahhn* as was Ren him-

self. His very presence spoke of strength and granite resolution. The prefect was obviously not a man to be lightly deflected from his task.

"Agent Ren—" the handshake was a mere formality—"I've asked you here because we need a better understanding of each other. My job is to maintain the law in Anharitte. Yours is to run a profitable exchange of trade through our sea and spaceport facilities. It would be a pity if in pursuit of our respective duties we should happen to collide."

"Indeed a pity." Ren shifted uncomfortably on his chair. "However, I think the possibility is slight. We traders are aware that we remain here on sufference."

"Don't fence with me," said Di Irons savagely. "I spoke of understanding. We both know that the lords of Anharitte are as much dependent on your money as you are upon access to the freeport facilities. So let's speak frankly. I know that you and your director intend making feud with the *Imaiz*."

Ren examined his inquisitor warily. "You know of that?"

"Of course. Not much occurs in Anharitte that isn't known in the prefecture. Whether or not we choose to act on what we know depends on our interpretation of the law. Provocation isn't an offense. But if Vestevaal had struck Zinder the other day we'd have been very much concerned."

"To protect a slave?" Ren affected a measure of surprise he did not feel.

Di Irons' voice was quieter now but just as dangerous. "No. We would have had to intervene to protect your stupid hides. And that offends our idea of preservation of the peace. You're no stranger here, Ren. You know which way the tides flow in Anharitte."

"I know it," said Ren, "but the director needed proof of my interpretation."

"Well, I gather he got it. But I don't advise him to make an open confrontation like that again. Zinder has too many sympathizers to make it a healthy pastime. But what escapes me is why your director needed proof of her ability to cut him down to size."

"Because it's my contention that if the *Imaiz* continues to educate slaves to her level, the slave structure will crumble. Your society as it now exists will crumble. Don't ask me what will replace it—but it will certainly be a system with less tolerance toward Freetrade than the one we enjoy at the moment."

"So that's it." Di Irons was suddenly caught by the speculation.

"You asked for understanding," said Ren. "Well, I've shown my

blade. Now dare you return the gesture? I don't imagine you lords of Anharitte would look upon the withdrawal of Freetrade with much favor."

"No!" Di Irons reacted violently. "You'll not involve me in politics. The *Imaiz* may be ill advised in the way he treats his slaves. But if I were to take arms against every slavemaster I considered ill advised I would not have half enough cells in which to hold them—or a tenth enough tormentors to make their stay uncomfortable. In any case, I think you're reading more into this than is written. I know Dion well. He's a frequent guest in my household."

"And Zinder? Is she a frequent guest, too? A slave?"

"If Dion wills it. A slavemaster's rights over his bondslaves are absolute—and that's a principle I must uphold. If he chooses to pretty her and pamper her it's no concern of mine. She would not be the first bondslave to become a favored concubine—though I'll not say that's what she is. If Dion is pleased to bring her to my table I'll be the last to interfere. In any case, Zinder's a charming and cultured girl."

"And you approve of a bondslave's being educated to this level?"

"I don't necessarily approve when a master has a slave stoned to death for some imagined slight. My function is not to judge but to maintain the law. Thus far I've no evidence that Dion-daizan has broken it."

"Then you're not willing to assist us in protecting Anharitte from the *Imaiz*'s slave policy?"

"I'm not even convinced there is any threat. A man who owns slaves must always be on guard against rebellion—and I fancy Dion runs less risk of this than most. But above all, the law must be neutral—or it ceases to be law and becomes tyranny. Let it not be said that a prefect of Anharitte used his position to persecute others on the word of an outworld merchant's agent.

"If you think you have a grievance against Dion-daizan you can have recourse to the supreme court in Gaillen. Or you can attempt to achieve satisfaction through the services of a society. But let them advise you on tactics. The societies know how to operate with discretion. If your feud moves into the public realm I shall act—and act decisively and without favor. Do I make myself clear?"

"Would you also move against the *Imaiz* if the necessity arose?"

"The lords of Anharitte have certain rights of arms. Outside those, whoever destroys the peace of Anharitte will be forced to ac-

count to me. That goes for the *Imaiz*, for the other lords—and most especially for you, Ren. Agent you may be, but if you assume the role of *agent provocateur* then you'll not find us so hospitable."

Ren scowled with disappointment. "I doubt the other lords would condone your tolerance toward the activities of Dion-daizan and his slaves."

THE prefect exploded in anger. "You're an outworlder, Ren. Don't try and tell me what Di Rode and Di Guaard and the Lady T'Ampere would or wouldn't think. I was raised with these people. I know what they think better than they know it themselves."

"But you weren't raised with the *Imaiz*," said Ren coldly. "Because the suggestion is very strong that he's a Terran. Don't tell me that doesn't offend your precious law?"

For the first time Di Irons seemed unsure of himself.

"You have evidence to support that statement?"

"No positive proof as yet. But I will have. Don't you query the rights of the claimants to your aristocratic Houses?"

"Query?" Di Irons was grimly amused. "Do you think I would dare look closely at the credentials of Di Rode or Di Guaard—or they at mine? How many murdered infants do you suppose would be found in the moats? Which unfortunate son went alive into his tomb behind the new wall in the tower? Whose mother is that demented crone who has sat in chains for thirty years in the dungeon? The rights of the title go to the claimant with the ability to survive at the top. The state acknowledges the title of the House—the holder of the title declares himself."

"I understand all that," said Ren patiently. "But surely the position is different if the occupant of the title is an outworlder?"

"It would be—if the matter could be proved. Then I would have to act. But you've admitted you don't have the evidence. Until you do, I submit you're playing a very dangerous game."

"Dangerous in what way?" asked Ren.

"I know Dion well. He's shrewd, resourceful—and his information is impeccable. What do you think he'll be doing while you wander the countryside trying to stir trouble against him? I strongly advise you to guard your back, not to visit dark places alone and to engage a taster to test your food. If you were to die—I'm sure I'd have a hard time trying to hang the responsibility on Dion-daizan."

"I'll remember that. But in the

meantime, think over what I've said. I doubt even you would refuse a quarter of Magda's share of the income from the spaceports concession."

"I prize some things above money," said Di Irons. "And one of them is life. Nobody in his senses provokes a needless quarrel with a man as far-reaching and formidable as Dion-daizan. I know it's not fashionable among Freetraders to speak of magic and superstition, but some of the works of the *Imaiz* are well beyond the powers of man."

"That I must yet have proved to me," said Tito Ren. "For the moment I prefer to regard him merely as an academic Terran adventurer with no supernatural powers."

"It would be churlish of me," said Di Irons, "not to wish you a successful venture. If what you've told me is true I stand to gain or lose as much as you. But I would need more reason than you've given before I raised my hand against the wizard of Anharitte. Take care, merchant. You've chosen a stronger enemy than you think."

The conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door. A watchman came in, apologized for the intrusion and handed Di Irons a note. The latter read it, looked questioningly at Ren for a moment—then his face broke into a wry smile.

"It appears I spoke more truly than I knew. Don't tell me after this that you don't believe in the powers of the *Imaiz.*"

"Why? What's happened?"

"You rent a bonded oil and spirit warehouse on the quayside of Firstwater?"

"I do." Ren was half on his feet. "What's the trouble?"

"It's on fire," said Di Irons. "You had best get down there. I think this will not be the last conversation we'll be having on the matter, so you have my permission to proceed. But tomorrow I'll be asking questions. I don't tolerate the destruction of property in a private feud—and if I find proof that either you or Dion-daizan has done this deliberately, an accounting will have to be made."

"I'm not likely to set fire to my own warehouse," said Ren bitterly.

"And Dion's not stupid enough to indulge in ordinary arson," said Di Irons. "Or in any event, I've never been able to prove he is. If you find me some proof, Ren, I'll guarantee to lay it where it belongs."

IV.

REN thought of returning to his chambers for his cushioncraft.

Then he realized that the poling of the vehicle by stavebearers through the city streets and down the Trade Road would be a slow and tiresome business. A mule cart would be quicker—but not much. The total distance from the prefecture to Firstwater was no greater than two kilometers and much of the way lay down the slopes of Firsthill into the valley formed with Thirdhill on the other shore. Overall he calculated he could make the journey more quickly on foot and he set out at a labored jog—with complete disregard for lack of dignity or sweat.

He had barely cleared the fringes of the buildings and come out at the end of the Trade Road overlooking Firstwater when he became aware of the broad smoke column rising into the sultry air. If he had thought the fire might only be a minor one his surmise was soon corrected. Even through the dense smoke cloud he could see the bright seat of the flame—and its visibility at this distance told him that the conflagration must be total as far as his installation was concerned.

The Trade Road was easy to negotiate. Such carts as were on it were also moving downhill, laden with spectators eager to witness the fire. Most of these vehicles, braked with iron wedges and chains against the slope, were easily overtaken, and his urgent running raised a great deal of amused comment. On the Via Arena the crowds thickened and the road to Magda Crossing was nearly impassable in the direction of the river. Fortunately a group of Pointed Tails met him and forged him a path through the mobs to a point near the burning warehouse.

The Pointed Tails' fire appliance was there—with all its hand-cranked absurdity. So obviously inadequate was it against the roaring inferno that confronted it that it had not been put into even token use. Two other societies had also brought their appliances, but these were equally useless and stood well clear of the outer perimeter fence, where they would not be affected by the intense heat.

The fire itself was overwhelming. The whole building, with walls of massive stone blocks, vibrated with the tremendous roar of the furnace within. The structure had no windows, and the two exterior doors jetted streams of angry flame like enormous blowlamps. The roof, once a structure of heavily tarred wood, was completely gone. Surmounting the walls was a continuous crown of fire, which produced such intense heat that the spectators had to move back repeatedly to avoid being scorched.

The warehouse had two perimeter fences, one contained

within the other, but it was now impossible to approach the building nearer than the confines of the outer fence. Here Ren found Catuul Gras, his face heavy red from the heat. Catuul was watching the progress of the conflagration with frank disbelief. His expressive glance at Ren suggested both physical and mental agony. He gestured toward his own useless fire appliance.

"I took the liberty of calling on the spaceport for emergency assistance. I hope I did right."

"Exactly right," approved Ren. "How did the fire start?"

"We don't know. No goods have moved in or out of the warehouse for fifteen days. Everything was secure on the last round of the society guards and the picket between the fences has been strictly maintained. The fire started behind locked doors and we're certain that nobody could have entered."

"Could some sort of time fuse or incendiary mechanism have been placed inside?"

Catuul grimaced. "I know of no device obtainable hereabouts with such a long delay. But if you're thinking this is the work of the *Imaiz* you pose a paradox. Those doors were sealed several days before your quarrel with Dion-daizan became actual. You could only suspect his hand if you were prepared to credit him with the magical powers you deny he possesses."

"Nevertheless, the timing's too perfect to be a matter of coincidence. Even Di Irons hinted he suspected that the *Imaiz* was behind it. Well, if it is Dion's work and there's any evidence left to prove it, it will give us a good start for our harassment. Di Irons is all set to string up the *Imaiz* by the thumbs if he's found responsible for the destruction of property during a private feud. All he needs is proof—and here come the boys who can give it to us."

MOVEMENT among the watchers on the road signaled the arrival of the cushioncraft emergency tender from the spaceport. Behind it came two more tenders containing compound foam and chemicals and were deftly manipulated into place. In complete contrast to the laughable native fire appliances, these three vehicles, normally reserved for spacecrash emergencies, were magnificently equipped and manned by trained and competent crews. Within seconds the great pumps were working and hoses were being run out as far as the river to bring in the additional water necessary to complete the work of the foam coverage.

Pictor Don, the spaceport's emergency commander, spared neither Ren nor Catuul a glance as he deployed his facilities for maximum effect. The foam from the hoses hit the side of the building and wherever it touched it solidified into glass slag and instantly formed an air-excluding seal that was also an impressive heat-reducing barrier. The properties of the solidifying foam were such that it could easily withstand the temperatures involved, while its noncommunicating cellular structure was light, yet strong enough to prevent the collapse of all but the heaviest parts of buildings. In dealing with a fire of these proportions the shell of the building could literally be filled with foam in a matter of minutes with a hundred per cent expectation of complete extinction of the fire.

The radiated heat fell away dramatically as the foam blanket coated the walls and the forecourt. Ren and Catuul followed the fire team nearer as the work of filling the building's shell with foam began. After a short while, however, they became aware that something was wrong—the flames in the interior, instead of yielding, had become concentrated in one central spot and now roared like a volcano. The flare hurled large pieces of congealed foam high into the air to fall at a distance, to the intense consternation of the onlookers.

Finally Pictor Don dropped down from his command point and came over to Ren.

"What have you got in there, Tito? Rocket fuel?"

The agent shook his head. "No. Mainly high-grade crude oils and essential oils waiting shipment offworld to Rance for refining."

"But the oxidants," protested Don. "You should know better than to store oxidants with flammables."

"There are no oxidants there. In fact, no tonnages of oxidants are available on Roget."

Pictor Don shook his head. "That foam can extinguish anything up to and including a blazing well-head without trouble. But you've got something in there that could have put the whole building comfortably into orbit had the jet been pointed down instead of up. A few tons of liquid oxygen would do the trick with your high-grade oil—but without oxygen you couldn't produce a flare like that in a million years."

"No oxygen," said Ren. "There's not a liquid oxygen plant within sixteen light-years of Roget and it's a dead certainty that oxygen is not imported."

A cry from a member of the fire team indicated that the situation

was changing. Pictor Don returned to his post and Ren saw the bright plume of flame above the building gradually diminish and finally become extinguished by the solidifying foam. The fire was out.

"What happens now?" asked Catuul.

"First they extract the heat from the surface by cooling the mass with water. Then they progressively add alkali to the water and this slowly dissolves the foam. By control of what they spray they can stop the process at any point to allow the removal of potentially dangerous masonry or to inspect for signs of arson before the evidence is too much disturbed."

THE fire team was now spraying river water from its hoses, but such was the heat-insulating effectiveness of the cellular mass that very little of the intense heat still trapped below the surface was available to be carried away by the water. Pictor Don mounted a hydraulic hoist and climbed from it to the surface of the foam filling the building's walls. The strength of the glasslike substance was such that his weight barely dented the surface. He scrunched over almost the entire area of the warehouse on a quick tour of inspection.

He ordered alkali to be applied. About a thirty-centimeter layer of the foam was stripped from the surface by chemical leaching. Newly exposed fragments of the building were cooled with water and a second round of inspection followed.

Then the emergency commander approached the edge of the building and called over the wall. "Get Tito Ren up here—and that Pointed Tail fellow."

Somewhat reluctantly Ren and Catuul Gras allowed themselves to be conducted to the hoist and raised to the top of the wall. There was something unnerving about stepping onto a layer of foam that had been a sprayable liquid such a short time before. The surface felt alarmingly fragile. Overcoming their fears, however, the two walked across the crunching surface toward Pictor Don. At a certain point he cautioned them to stop.

"Mind where you put your feet in that area just in front of you. There's a giant bubble in the foam reaching, as far as I can judge, right down to base level. That was the blowhole through which the last flame persisted. Unless I miss my guess, the root cause of the fire lies directly at the bottom end of that bubble. Does its position give you any clues?"

Catuul glanced around at the

fragments of outer wall visible above the foam, trying to verify his bearings. "We're located over what was the inner storeroom."

"What was kept in there?"

"The high-grade crude oil," said Ren.

"In metal tanks?"

"No. Wooden barrels. It's the only way the native producers will package it. Wharfage facilities don't run to the accommodation of tankers."

"Wasn't there anything else?" Pictor Don was completely unconvinced.

"Nothing," said Ren. "I counted the barrels myself. We were going to repackage the whole consignment in spaceweight containers ready for shipment. And every single barrel was broached to obtain analysis samples, so I can guarantee that the store contained nothing but high-grade oil."

"Very well." Pictor Don's voice still carried no evidence of conviction. He indicated that they should all return to the ground. The chemical stripping of the foam began again, with interruptions at intervals for repeated inspections. Finally Don again called for Ren and Catuul Gras.

The thickness of the foam had been reduced to a meter. The space around the blowhole had been completely cleared for a radius of several meters. Ren and his colleague were now able to inspect the area Pictor Don regarded as the base of the fire.

"A drain—" Ren regarded the charred and blackened area of the floor with astonishment.

"Yes." Don was critical. "A drain you used to take the overspill of oil during the sampling of the barrels for analysis, perhaps?"

"There was some oil spillage," agreed Ren. "But I don't see—"

"Where does the drain lead?"

"To the river, I should hope."

SECONDS later he was running across the broad forecourt toward the river, a sudden suspicion in his mind. The banks were complex with piers and moorings and wharves, but hard against the bank protruded one particular pipe whose end even now drained black dregs from the disastrous fire. The marks of a coupling that had been placed over the pipe's end were plainly visible—the coupling itself was gone, along with the craft that undoubtedly had borne it.

Angrily Ren scanned the river. The slow drift of barges and ships—left toward the spaceport and right toward the shipping lanes and the sea—was a complex movement that defied analysis. The number of barges and ships provided too much information for Ren to be able to

determine which craft might be equipped with couplings to hold against his particular drain and discharge tonnage quantities of oxidant under pressure into the interior of the warehouse. Here was plain evidence of sabotage, but no proof of the sort that could be used to point a finger at Dion-daizan.

"It was a honey of a scheme," Ren said later in grudging admiration. "We'll never convince Di Irons of the truth—"

Pictor Don had himself lowered on a cradle down to the entrance of the pipe. Here he explored with an instruments.

"The water from the hosedown has washed out all real evidence," he said. "But I'd guess somebody's been feeding pure oxygen up this pipe—and I'd say the probability was high that it was obtained by boiling off liquid oxygen."

"And the ignition?" asked Ren.

"They wouldn't need to bother. The oil would ignite spontaneously as the oxygen concentration went up. You've been rather cleverly sabotaged, Tito."

"And no prizes for guessing by whom," said Ren morosely.

"I thought you said there was no tonnage oxygen available on Roget?"

"There are no plants that we're aware of, Pictor. Native industry isn't that far advanced. But I'm wondering if there aren't oxygen facilities in Castle Magda. A good Terran technician supplied with the sort of money the spaceport dues provide shouldn't have too much trouble building a liquid oxygen plant—or any other technical facility, when you come to think of it."

"But I don't see," said Catuul Gras, "how it could be known that putting something up that particular pipe would result in a fire in our warehouse. There are hundreds of similar pipes to choose from. In any case, the drain at the other end of the pipe might not have been in the right position."

"I think I know how that was decided," said Ren. "Somebody worked out the details of that episode from inside the warehouse." He indicated the gang of slaves now filing back into the warehouse compound ready to start the work of demolition and clearance.

"If the *Imaiz* could bring Zinder to Terran graduate standard, how many other slaves has he similarly educated and then resold? It's slightly unnerving to think that we could have one or two graduate chemists working as bondslaves in our establishments. Think what an effective fifth column that would make. Is it possible, Catuul, that we've acquired some slaves the *Imaiz* might have trained?"

"It's possible. "The *Imaiz* buys and sells many slaves, using many different auctioneers. Nobody save the prefect would have a continous record of any single slave's history. Dion-daizan could hold one for years and then return him to the market—and nobody would be the wiser."

"But the auctioneers keep records of their individual transactions?"

"They keep all normal records by way of trade. What did you have in mind?"

"I doubt Di Irons will allow us access to the prefecture records. But I need an individual history for every slave we possess. Go back to the auctioneers and use whatever pressures you must to obtain copies of their records relating to the slaves in whom we're interested. I'll have a computer programed at the spaceport. With it we should be able to reconstruct individual histories—I want to know of any slave whose bond has been with the *Imaiz* for one year or more."

"With what object?"

"So that we may closely question those whom the *Imaiz* may have trained or influenced. They may tell us much about Dion, his objectives and his facilities. When we've finished we have the legal right to do with them whatever the evidence suggests. We should at least find the men behind the warehouse sabotage. Possibly we'll find many more who've not yet had the time to make a move against us."

Catuul's eyes shone with comprehension. "It's a good plan, friend Tito. I don't anticipate much difficulty about copying the auctioneers' records. It's frequently done by those comparing slave stock for breeding purposes."

"Then the matter is settled," said Ren. "When the director gets back he's going to expect us to have some pretty damaging ammunition aimed at the *Imaiz*. He's not going to be too happy about the loss of the warehouse. Some of the essential oils in it were priceless by any standards. From this point on we're very much at war with the *Imaiz.*"

V

VESTEVAAL, on his return, was much perturbed that the *Imaiz* had struck the first damaging blow in a fight essentially started by Ren. To cover himself Ren outlined his policy for evaluating the slaves and isolating those who had been under the *Imaiz's* influence. Vestevaal was impressed by the detail, but pointed out that the action was purely defensive. Wars were not won by orderly retreats.

The merchant worlds of Combien

and Rance had firmly stressed to Vestevaal the importance of Anharitte as a freeport and had backed their stand by donating the battle cruiser now at the spaceport. The Freetrade Security Council had been just as vociferous and had not only pledged unlimited financial backing, but had insisted on sending a professional troubleshooter, Dr. Alek Hardun, as a technical backup for Ren's team. Implicit in this latter action was the threat that if Ren did not make a success of defeating the *Imaiz*, the merchant worlds and the Freetrade Council were quite prepared to move in a stronger cadre to settle the question.

"Nevertheless," said Ren, "if we're to retain the cooperation of the societies, we must first observe the principle of harassment and feud. To attempt outright war on the *Imaiz* at this stage could set even the societies against us, because we're outworlders and they're indigenous. I know all the arguments, but if we turn public opinion against us the planetary government will have to act—and we'll have lost the freeport anyway."

"Well, it's still your show, Tito. But let's see some positive action against the *Imaiz*. I want to see him hit where it hurts and not only for my personal satisfaction. I have to make reports back to the Freetrade Council. I never was much good at making negative reports."

"Then how about this for an opener? We intend to contest Zinder's bondship with Dion-daizan."

Vestevaal swung around abruptly.

"Damn!" he said. "That would certainly make Dion sit up. How would you set about it?"

Ren smiled wolfishly. "All bondships have to be registered at the prefecture—and that's the only official record. If anything happened to the entry regarding the bondship of Zinder to Dion-daizan the *Imaiz* would have no legal way of proving his ownership."

"And it can be arranged that something will happen to the entry?"

"The register clerk is a minor member of the Society of Pointed Tails."

"Surely it isn't as simple as that."

"No. In normal circumstances the loss of the entry would not affect the position, because the rights of ownership of the bond would not be contested. But in this case the ownership will be called into question by the Pointed Tails acting on your behalf. As prefect, Lord Di Irons won't be very happy about the situation, but in order to uphold the law he'll have to impound

Zinder until the matter is settled. That leaves Dion-daizan with two courses of action. He can take the case to the supreme court in Gaillen—where he would win, of course, except that the litigation could take a year—"

"Or?"

"He could take the quicker course of accepting the fact that he has no provable right to Zinder's bond. In that case Zinder would be put into the slave market, from which Dion-daizan could hope to buy her back."

"As a very rich man he should have no trouble on that score," said Vestevaal dubiously.

"No. But it's an open market. Anyone can bid who's entitled to hold a slave-bond. That rules you out as a direct participant, but it doesn't stop the Pointed Tails from acting on your behalf. If we bid against Dion, using our backing from the Galactic Bank as guarantee, we could force up the price to where even Dion's resources would be strained. We could make him cripple himself financially in order to save her."

The director smote his knee in lusty approval.

"You know, Tito, you've something of a genius for this sort of thing. Keep up this level of skulduggery and we'll see you on the Freetrade Council yet."

HEARTENED, Ren strolled down to the lodge of the Pointed Tails. The place always impressed and fascinated him. Here the ancient *Ahhn* customs and architecture had been carefully preserved from outworld influences. The walls and ceilings of the lodge were ornamented with red and gold reliefs showing stylized pictures of legendary battles, with captions worded in the original but now lapsed High-Ahhn cuneiform script. The whole establishment was richly carpeted, hung with remarkably descriptive tapestries and scented with delicate fragrances. It was the closest the *Ahhn* had ever come to creating a temple. In its halls the history of a proud and intelligent race was set out to show its richness and cohesion and a depth of culture that could have been the envy of many older civilizations.

Catuul Gras seemed to be expecting him and Ren was not surprised. He knew the intimate web of observation and communication with which the societies laced the city.

"Does the director approve of the plan to contest Zinder's bond?" Catuul asked.

"He does. We're to proceed as planned. I think we'd best make our move this afternoon, in case some suspicion of what we intend leaks back to the *Imaiz.*"

"I agree, friend Tito. Speed and secrecy are essential. We will watch for Zinder to come to the fruit market today. As soon as I'm sure she's there I'll have my colleague, Mallow Rade, lay formal complaint at the prefecture and demand her impoundment."

"And the entry in the register?"

"That's already taken care of. The matter only waits for us to draw it to the prefect's attention. But news travels with the flies in Anharitte. I suggest neither you nor your director show yourselves outside your chambers until the watchmen have arrested her. I hope the prefect will have enough sense to bring sufficient men to prevent any trouble. As the director's agent, it will be necessary for you to be present at the formal discussion of the case afterward. It might be safer if the director didn't expose himself at all for a day or two."

"I doubt he'll agree," said Ren. "But I'll try to get the point over to him. How's the work going on collecting information for preparing histories on the slaves?"

"Slowly. As fast as we get the lists complete we're sending them by runner to Dr. Hardun at the spaceport."

"Good. Have we any results as yet?"

"Most interestingly, yes. We can't produce the histories until all the copying is complete, but already a pattern is starting to emerge. The *Imaiz* buys and sells many slaves in an apparently random fashion. But Dr. Hardun's pointed out that there's a system behind it."

"Oh? What sort of system?" Ren was immediately attentive.

"Dion-daizan has an arrangement with the slave auctioneers whereby he's notified when a new batch of slaves is available. He sends his steward to make a preliminary viewing, then bids heavily for those he chooses."

"Which is surely a reasonable practice?"

"Yes, except that he purchases many times his normal labor requirement. All but a few of these he shortly returns to the market for resale."

"And presumably makes a profit on the deal."

Catuul shook his head. "No. The significant thing is that he usually takes a loss because he outbid the market in the first place."

"I don't see—" Ren's voice carried a note of puzzlement. "Then, assuming he's no philanthropist, the value of the transactions must lie uniquely in the few he doesn't return for sale."

Catuul nodded. "The only information we could gain about them was obtained by questioning the

ones he rejected. It appears that all the slaves he purchases are given a very thorough medical checkup and put through a series of tests."

"What sort of tests?"

"I think you outworlders describe them as intelligence and aptitude tests. The few who pass remain with the *Imaiz*. The failures are returned to the market."

"So that Dion-daizan is cultivating a select group of intelligent, capable and healthy slaves?"

"Presumably. But it's interesting to guess at the standards he's working toward. Dr. Hardun examined the best of the latest batch the *Imaiz* had offered for resale. Some of Dion's rejects were not only above average intelligence and fitness for the slave caste—they were also above average for citizens of any class."

Ren's scowl caused his eyebrows to meet. "So Dion's not only building a select group of slaves, he's culling an elite. Zinder's no happy accident. Nor is she likely to be unique. Damn—how long has this been going on, Catuul?"

"Certainly for ten years, probably longer. I suppose at least seventy per cent of marketable slaves in Anharitte have been through his hands at some time or another. And he also buys some in the provinces."

"And pure-bred *Ahhn* stock is renowned for its high intelligence. Dion's probably acquired a concentration of brains in Magda that is unique on Roget—perhaps unique on any of the known worlds. Can you arrange that only low-grade slaves are offered to Dion in future?"

"I'll do what I can. With most auctioneers a little pressure will do the trick. The ones we can't influence are those the Pointed Tails themselves are duty-bound to protect. We can't hurt one of our own clients for the benefit of another."

"Then tell them frankly what we

think the *Imaiz* is about. Ask for their cooperation. It's in their interests to work with us because if the *Imaiz* wins, the slave trade dies."

"It might work with some," said Catuul dubiously. "But others make much money out of the *Imaiz*. There will be many who won't want to offend him and who will be suspicious of your motives."

VI

REN stayed at the window of his office chambers all that afternoon. Zinder was late arriving. Finally, however, her dark hair and proud bearing made her as apparent in the crowd as a lantern in the darkness. Even the excellence of her flowing gown set her as a woman apart and made her impossible to miss. Attuned as he was to the pattern of undercurrents in the populace, Ren could sense a tension in the market, as though some suspicion of what was to take place had already passed as rumor.

Vestevaal fretted in a chair behind him. A man of direct action, he had no use for patient observation from behind half-drawn curtains, nor did he accept the principle that feud and harassment were necessary preliminaries to destroying an enemy. Nevertheless he obeyed Ren's insistence that he confine himself indoors at least until after Zinder's arrest. He amused himself by interrogating the spaceport computer complex from Ren's line-fed office terminal and inspecting the agency accounts in the minutest detail.

When the watchmen arrived Ren saw the tension visibly rise in the market. As they moved in the direction of Zinder the scene became tinged with menace almost to the point of open resistance. But Di Irons knew his trade. As the arresting officers moved to take the slave girl a second force of watchmen deployed through the crowd ready to nip in the bud any pockets of disobedience. Even so the resentment was building to crisis proportions and some slight catalyst could easily have tipped the balance into violence. Ren understood now Catuul's insistence that Vestevaal should not be present when the arrest took place.

It was Zinder herself, however, who averted the dangerous phase. She shrugged amusedly at the watchmen's advance, then turned and addressed herself to the crowd. Ren could not hear what she said, but he was certain from the attention she was receiving that she was completely in control of the situation. She calmed and pacified the group around her and told it something that proved such a huge

joke that those nearest to her broke away laughing and went to retell it to others.

Prefect Di Irons thrust his way through and spoke to her. Again she laughed, and even he came out of the encounter with a reluctant smile curling the corners of his determined mouth. Then Zinder allowed herself to be escorted away. None of the watchmen touched her. They formed a double rank and she, obligingly, walked between them, moving off in the direction of the prefecture. The marketplace relaxed, yet returned not to trade but rather to heated and speculative conversation. Di Irons and the watchmen stood stolidly watchful for any hotheads who might try to rekindle hostility.

When Catuul Gras came up, Ren met him at the door.

"I think it's safe now, friend Tito. I have men enough to cover you to the prefecture. The hearing will take place as soon as Dion-daizan can get a spokesman there. Zinder has predicted to the crowd that the *Imaiz* will teach the director a great lesson. I must speak with him at once."

"He's inside," said Ren.

"Good. You go along to the prefecture. I'll follow as soon as I can."

Ren buckled on his sword and carefully checked the readiness of the blaster which he wore concealed beneath his shirt. Warily he moved out into the square. Surprisingly, nobody seemed to pay him much attention. This was now the battle of the giants, the *Imaiz* versus Vestevaal. Ren was merely a bit-player and not a main participant at all.

As he passed out of the square a sudden grip on his arm made Ren swing round. He found himself face to face with the prefect.

"Agent Ren, I'm not deceived. I can read your hand behind this little charade. I don't know what you hope to gain by antagonizing the *Imaiz*, but let me repeat my warning. Dion is more cunning than you'll allow. Twist his tail too often and he'll break you into a thousand parts. And if your machinations cause public trouble in Anharitte—I'll break you myself. I hope I make myself understood?"

"Perfectly," said Ren. "But I pay well for the best available advisers and they guarantee we're engaged in nothing contrary to the law. I take it we've a perfect right to request that Zinder be impounded pending a legal enquiry?"

"You have that right through a society," agreed Di Irons. "But I would not have thought you well advised to exercise it. The loss of the register entry is in itself suspect. I am now looking for a despoiler of

prefecture records—and Dion-daizan will be looking for blood. I suspect that if I delay my inquiries a little my problem will be answered for me. Be very cautious, Ren. You've chosen a dangerous adversary."

THE prefect moved away. Now that Zinder had actually been removed to the prefecture, the whole area had assumed an atmosphere of disturbed indignation that seemed unlikely to flare more violently. However, it was obvious that only the presence of so many watchmen had prevented a riot and open interference with the arrest. Ren understood how perilously close the incident had been to causing a breach of the peace and he saw that in this the *Imaiz* had a powerful weapon he could use against the Pointed Tails. By creating a public outcry at a similar maneuver he could easily throw the blame back on to the society and its employer as the prime sources of public unrest.

Ren's arrival at the prefecture was just in time for him to witness the lodging of an official notice contesting the *Imaiz's* ownership of Zinder by Mallow Rade, a junior scribe of the Pointed Tails. When the paper had been recorded Di Irons, whose mood seemed to be one of thunder, called formally for a spokesman from the House of Magda to pose a rebuttal.

For a long time nobody moved. Then, from the back of the crowd, a young slave pushed his way forward and presented his stewardship credentials to Di Irons.

"Ah, Barii." Di Irons seemed slightly relieved. "Do you know how Dion-daizan wishes to proceed in this matter?"

Barii, who bore his slave mark, together with the house symbol of Magda, like a proud badge on his naked arms, nodded. Ren was watching the youth intently, noting the same quiet confidence in the boy he had recognized in Zinder. Here was both an intelligence and a competence that had no place in the slave.

"May I see the register from which Dion's title is missing?"

Di Irons brought out the volume and opened it to the disputed page, exposing the rows of names scrawled painfully in a large and almost illegible script. One of the entries had clearly been overwritten at a later date. There was no doubt that the alteration had been deliberate.

Barii reached into his pouch and drew out some article the purpose of which was not plain until the unexpected brilliance of an electronic flash glared back from

the yellowing pages. A second flash illuminated the startled face of the register clerk. Barii put his camera back into its pouch and bowed to Di Irons. If his face held any expression at all it was one of concealed amusement and anticipation.

Then Barii spoke.

"Dion-daizan has noted the objections to his ownership of Zinder's bond. Everyone in Anharitte knows that Zinder's preeminence is largely due to her association with the House of Magda—thus there can be no doubt of the true tenure of her bond. However, the *Imaiz* is immensely concerned about the maintenance of the law on the three hills. In consequence he has directed that, since no clear title to his ownership seems to be recorded in the prefecture, he will renounce his claim to being Zinder's legal bondholder. He requests that the slave in question be put to public auction and that the proceeds of the sale be dedicated to the public funds of the city, as is the custom."

Di Irons had listened to this speech with growing disbelief. He seemed about to throw in some crushing protest, but was stopped by something he saw in Barii's face. The prefect's shrug was massive and uncomprehending.

"So be it," he said. "It's the considered opinion of the prefecture that the bondship of Zinder has no clear tenure. The slave woman called Zinder will therefore be returned to the market and submitted to public auction. Let it be known that anyone desirous of obtaining this property may attend tomorrow at the preset hour and bid legal coinage for unrestricted bond rights. The matter is now dismissed from these courts."

Ren's attentive eyes fell upon the register clerk, whose hands had undoubtedly been responsible for the alteration of the entry. The clerk seemed relieved that Di Irons had so easily acceded to the contesting of the records, yet his nervous glances at Barii showed that he knew retribution was still due. The steward's act of photographing the entry had shaken him badly and his ashen hue was indicative of a deep and mortal fear. Knowing of the clerk's association with the Pointed Tails, Ren was pleased to note that members of the clan moved protectively nearer to the clerk to guard him against danger.

Di Irons was looking at his treacherous clerk with something akin to murder in his eyes. His sword hand convulsively gripped the hilt of his weapon. For a moment Ren thought that Di Irons was going to attack the fellow, but Barii moved between them and a

slight lift of his eyebrows caused the prefect to relax.

Ren relaxed too.

All Anharitte was watching the outcome of this dispute—the supposed omnipotence on the *Imaiz* was now on public trial. Diondaizan's easy acquiescence to the challenge might mean only that he had chosen the slave market as the quicker route for regaining Zinder's bond, but currently the wizard's public image must have suffered a lowering as a result of Ren's audacious move. Ren had well prepared the ground ahead. It was going to be an interesting battle.

REN awoke in the night with a start. A house servant was shaking his arm.

"Agent Ren—wake up, please! The prefect sends for you urgently."

Shaking the sleep from his head, Ren roused himself and forced his mind to concentrate.

"What did you say?"

"The prefect sends watchmen to guide you. The register clerk is dead."

"Damn!" said Ren, struggling into his clothes. "What has it to do with me?"

He went downstairs to remonstrate with the watchmen who waited in the downstairs office. The sergeant listened to his protest without expression.

"The Lord Di Irons is aware of your position. Nonetheless he directs we conduct you to the place of the accident."

"Accident?"

The sergeant refused to be drawn out. "Come, Agent Ren. Lord Di Irons himself will explain the matter."

Ren reached for his cloak, girded on his sword and reluctantly followed the watchmen into the night.

The air outside was chill and damp with the clinging mists from the sea. The whole township was in darkness save for the occasional flare of the watch braziers and the torches carried by his escort. The sudden transition from sleep to the cold darkness and the leaping flames of the brands touched the scene with unreality made only more credible by the hardness of the shifting, round cobbles underneath his feet.

The route the watchmen chose was unfamiliar to Ren, involving numerous turns down narrow streets and alleys until his whole sense of direction was destroyed. Finally the party halted in front of a mean drinking place and Ren waited impatiently while the watchmen knocked on a small and unfamiliar door. Shortly, bolts

were drawn and the great bulk of Di Irons himself loomed between the door posts.

"Ah, Ren. Come in. You're an astute man, so I'm going to give you an opportunity to exercise your cleverness."

The prefect leaned past Ren and instructed the watchmen to continue searching the area. Then he withdrew into the room and beckoned to Ren. The doorway was so small that even Ren had to duck his head as he entered. The ceiling inside was scarcely higher and the room stank of cheap alcohol and the presence of too many bodies. Ten of the Pointed Tails, Catuul Gras among them, sat in a circle around a flickering lamp, looking uneasily at Di Irons. On the far side of the room another door led out to a small bricked courtyard, which two watchmen illuminated with poled lanterns. Across the threshold of this second door lay the register clerk. He had a fatal wound in this throat and blood spread wide across the floor.

Di Irons was crushing. "I lay the responsibility for this piece of mischief at your door, Ren."

The statement caught Ren completely off guard.

"Mine?"

"Of course."

"But I had nothing whatever to do with his death."

"Then you should consider better the consequences of your actions. I know perfectly well that this man overwrote Dion-daizan's title in the register and I know that your money induced him to do it. Now he's dead because of it. If this piece of bloodshed is an example of how you mean to harass the *Imaiz* you'd be well advised to employ a more competent society." He spat in the general direction of Catuul Gras.

"I admit I could have been an interested party," said Ren. But if the man's dead it was the *Imaiz*, who had him killed. Why don't you tax him with it?"

"I would—if I had a shred of proof. But we've found no trace of an assassin, no sign of any weapon. It's only our suspicion that the *Imaiz* would want this man destroyed. There's no tangible connection with Dion-daizan. If you can give me proof of his complicity, I'll take the issue to his door. Until then I regard this as the result of your own inept machinations."

"You've found no weapon?" Ren was perplexed. He turned to Catuul Gras. "Weren't you here when it happened?"

"I was—we all were." Catuul's gesture encompassed his comrades. "We chose this house because it has only one door connecting with the street—and that door could be stoutly bolted. The windows have

shutters inside and the courtyard leads only to blank walls. Here, at least, we thought we could defend him from the mighty wrath of the *Imaiz.*"

"Then what happened?" Ren was impatient.

"We were drinking moderately and talking and because the roof is low the room soon grew hot. We opened the door to the courtyard to let in air, since we dared not unbar the windows. Even then, for safety's sake, we put three men in the courtyard so that no surprise attack could come from there."

"And?"

"The clerk was badly worried and drank more freely than was wise. Knowing the courtyard was guarded, he felt safe in going to the door to relieve himself into the gully. As he reached the door he seemed to choke and we saw him fall down just where you see him now. His throat was torn and he drowned in his own blood."

"Then how did—?"

"We don't know. Those in the courtyard saw and heard nothing, nor did those of us who stayed inside. Whatever split his throat has not been found, though we've searched the yard and the room a dozen times. No man among us has recent blood on his weapons, so even treachery is ruled out. I personally think that the *Imaiz* sent an invisible beast to claw out his throat."

"You know I can't accept that," said Ren angrily. "There are no such things as invisible beasts."

REN bent down to examine the wound, but realized, with his fingers and shoes slipping with blood, that he had neither the knowledge nor the stomach to gain much from the examination. He passed on out into the courtyard, inspected its solid walls and tried to scrutinize the higher surroundings, which were obscured by darkness. Finding no solution to the mystery, he climbed back past the body in the doorway and faced Di Irons.

"If you'll permit, Prefect, I'd like Dr. Hardun at the spaceport to perform an examination of the body."

"Will that help, Agent Ren? The man is dead—his throat is gone. What more can be learned from him?"

"There must be some evidence of whatever broke his throat. We've many facilities on the battle cruiser. A weapon that caused that damage must have left a trace. If it's there we'll find it."

The prefect shrugged. "I see no harm in your trying. If you wish you may come and take the body after daybreak. And you, Catuul, will have an accounting to make with his widow. I shall hold the

Pointed Tails responsible for the cremation and all expenses. Nobody's lightly going to disturb the peace while I'm prefect on the three hills.

"It will be as you direct, Prefect," said Catuul Gras quietly, though a variety of emotions struggled in his voice.

The prefect called his watchmen and departed. Ren turned to Catuul in anger.

"The fate of the clerk is unfortunate, but I thought your society could have handled a thing like the death of a member with discretion. How did Di Irons come to learn of it?"

"I asked myself the same thing," said Catuul. "The watchmen claim they were called here because of complaints of a disturbance. But there was no disturbance. When the man fell dead we were too amazed to cry out—and thereafter we were too afraid of attracting attention. Yet the watchmen arrived within minutes of the death. Indeed, they must have started on their way while the man was still alive. Whoever complained to them must have done so with a foreknowledge of the death to come."

"Di Irons seems reluctant to agree that the *Imaiz* must have been responsible. Does he have some sympathy for Dion-daizan?"

"I think not. Di Irons concerns himself with the peace of the city. If two sides feud he cares little which side goes under—as long as the fighting is contained. Knowing this, Dion is perhaps using him to harass us like fools. I swear to you one thing, friend Tito—if Dion-daizan hopes to buy Zinder back at the auction he'll find her the most expensive purchase he has ever attempted."

VII

THE slave market was situated on the eastern slopes of Anharitte, in the bowl through which descended the old road leading to the valley and to Secondhill and T'Ampere. The location was said to have been chosen in the days when slaves were leased to merchant vessels entering the shipping lanes to trade their cargoes along the inland rivers and canals. The slaves were used to handle the cargo exchanges and in theory returned to their owners when the ships once again reached the Aprillo *en route* to the sea.

However, so many slaves were lost through misuse by their temporary masters that the system fell into disrepute and slave-leases were abandoned.

It was doubtful if a more astute class of man existed on all the three hills than the average slave auc-

tioneer. Operating usually on a percentage basis against the immutable laws of supply and demand, he knew well how to present his wares to the best advantage and how to drive the shrewdest bargain.

This afternoon, however, most of the sale rostrums were unattended by clients, no matter how eloquently the vendors phrased their sales address. A curious order had replaced the normal hubbub of the slave market and almost all the onlookers were facing a solitary platform high on the slope. Watchmen were in abundance, as if to emphasize the weight of the hand of the law, but the crowd was genuinely good humored and interested in the coming spectacle. The atmosphere was one of anticipation rather than resentment. The occasion was the sale of Zinder's bond—and speculation had it that the *Imaiz* himself would be coming to the bidding.

Ren had arrived early with Catuul Gras and a more than nominal bodyguard of Pointed Tails. They first approached the auctioneer to establish Catuul's right to bid on behalf of Magno Vestevaal and to offer proof of the considerable funding on which they could draw if necessity arose. Then, under the jovial eyes of the happy auctioneer, they were offered selected seating in front of the rostrum from which to conduct their business. At a few minutes to the preset hour at which the proceedings should have begun there was still no sign of anyone from the House of Magda. Then the crowd divided abruptly and a man strode through alone—Diondaizan, the wizard of Anharitte.

This was the first time that Tito Ren had ever been really close to the *Imaiz* and he studied Dion carefully as the latter spoke to the auctioneer in the customary mode of introduction. Ren's analysis did not leave him particularly impressed. Of indeterminate age, though probably nearing fifty years, Dion appeared to eschew all forms of showmanship or affectation.

Clad in a simple white gown, without apparent weapons, Dion's face was neither distinguished nor particularly memorable. Only the movement of his hands indicated quiet confidence and competence that warned the agent to be wary. Whether or not the man was a Terran was not discernible from his unexceptional appearance, but he was obviously skilled in the control both of himself and others. And from the respect with which he was treated it was obvious that he was nearly a god in the eyes of Anharitte.

The auctioneer held up his hands for attention. His prologue was

treated to a quantity of good-natured banter from the onlooking assembly, but this died when Zinder herself was brought out.

Ren was stunned. He had seen the work of beauticians on seven prime worlds, but never in all his experience had he seen such exquisite presentation of the female form as Zinder managed on her way to the rostrum. The audience of perhaps a thousand held its breath as she walked on stage in burnished radiance. Only Dion himself seemed unimpressed.

Even the auctioneer became speechless. Though he had issued instructions that Zinder be readied for the market, he had not anticipated the skill in the hands of several inhabitants of Magda whose task it had somehow become. He started to make his customary appeal to would-be purchasers, but seemed to become awed by the wonder of it all. Evidently lost for words, he finally paid her the ultimate tribute—he kneeled and kissed her hand.

A cheer rose from the assembly.

CATUUL GRAS came coldly to his feet. "I bid you five barr for the bond," he said.

So low a price was a calculated insult. The audience tensed with anticipation. It was going to be an evening to remember.

"Raised to the second power," said Dion-daizan unhurriedly.

"Six barr to the second power," said Catuul Gras. He was playing his hand narrowly.

"To the third power," said Dion-daizan.

"Seven to the third power," Catuul said.

Ren, whose mathematical training probably transcended that of any in the watching public, lapsed into mental calculation of the true value of the bids, unsettled by the way in which the *Imaiz* each time multiplied the value of the bid by raising the index. It was absolutely certain that at some point the *Imaiz* was going to approach a figure he could not possibly afford, and at that point Catull must withdraw. He was relieved to note that, as the values rose, the scribe became more punctilious about obtaining confirmation before proceeding.

Nevertheless, Ren continued disconcerted by the actions of the *Imaiz*, who seemed determined to drive the price into truly astronomical figures.

It said much for the mental constitution of the auctioneer that he was able to continue functioning as evenly as he did in the face of the rapidly mounting values. He was

sweating profusely and developed a marked tremor of the limbs when his due commission on the sale would have made him rich beyond all his dreams. Still the contest continued.

Ren was now using a pocket calculator to bring out the absolute values of the bids in terms of the galactic credits. The *Imaiz* used no calculating aids, but Ren had the feeling that Dion-daizan was nevertheless completely aware of the real value of the figures with which they were playing. Only Catuul seemed out of his depth and repeatedly looked at Ren for confirmation that he was intended to continue.

"Ten barrs raised to the sixth power," said Catuul uneasily. This was more money than he had ever heard of.

"Ten to the seventh power." Dion-daizan showed slight signs of agitation although Ren suspected the wizard was well within his ample budget.

"Eleven to the seventh."

The *Imaiz* faltered and a gasp of anticipation ran through the watching crowd. Ren felt a savage elation at the thought of having placed the *Imaiz* on public trial. It was a beautiful piece of harassment.

"Eleven barrs to the eighth power," said the *Imaiz* finally.

Somebody in the crowd with some appreciation of the amount involved gave him a round of applause. Ren signaled for Catuul to continue.

"Twelve to the eighth," said Catuul grimly.

The *Imaiz* stopped and scanned the crowd, as if trying to estimate the cost of losing face. Then he shrugged resignedly and turned again to the auctioneer. Ren still judged Dion-daizan to be within the limits of his purse, but the wizard was obviously struggling with considerations that evidently weighed as heavily with him as the regaining of Zinder.

"Twelve to the ninth," said the master of Magda in a voice that could scarcely be heard.

Catuul Gras stole a warning look at Ren, but the agent had a reasonable idea of the *Imaiz's* true financial potential, based on the yearly spaceport dues paid to the House of Magda. He knew it was possible to squeeze the *Imaiz* even drier.

"Thirteen to the ninth," said Catuul.

"Thirteen to the tenth," said the Imaiz, his voice suddenly sharp with a new resolve.

"What's the old fox up to?" asked Catuul anxiously. "Has he really got that much money?"

"I think he has. But he's be-

coming uncomfortable. I think just once more must take him to the limit."

"Fourteen to the tenth," said Catuul.

The auctioneer had long since ceased to comprehend the magnitude of the figures being used and cared only that each bid was higher than the last. On a commission of even one per cent his family would be rich for generations.

Dion-daizan sat, his face suddenly bland. The auctioneer looked at him questioningly.

"Dion—don't you wish to raise?"

"Of course not." The *Imaiz's* face was alive with humor, revealing a richness of personality he had hitherto concealed. "Believe me, it's not through lack of finance, but in observance of a principle."

"Principle?" The auctioneer was lost.

"Yes," said Dion-daizan happily. "Anyone who would bid fourteen to the tenth power barrs for Zinder must have achieved a true appreciation of her worth. Far be it for me to deter such enlightenment. It's not every day that my progressive policies gain such eminent recognition. Nor is it often in Anharitte that the real worth of a human being is so openly acknowledged. May others soon become as wise as Director Vestevaal."

REN watched with mounting horror as the hammer fell. The auctioneer's voice boomed above the murmur of the crowd.

"I hereby declare the slave Zinder to be sold to the Society of Pointed Tails acting on behalf of its client, Director Magno Vestevaal. The agreed price is fourteen barrs raised to the tenth power—a completely unprecedented sum for any slave at any time in history and a truly magnificent tribute to the slave-training policy of the House of Magda."

"Damn!" Ren, ashen of face, staggered to his feet. It was too late to rescind the bid—the transaction was already complete. He turned appealingly to Catuul Gras.

"What the hell's Dion up to?"

"Teaching the director a lesson, I should think," said Catuul grimly. "Well he's certainly made his point—and at our expense. Let's face it, Tito. He's beaten us at our own game."

"I don't believe it," said Ren, consumed by his own anger. "A man like Dion isn't going to let Zinder go."

Zinder, from the rostrum, had displayed a keen interest in the proceedings. Far from seeming betrayed by Dion-daizan's action, she appeared elated. She saluted her late master who, in turn, approached her to kiss her hand. Then

Dion-daizan turned to the crowd and raised his hands in an expansive gesture of triumph. The ensuing cheer was probably the loudest roar of acclamation from human throats that Roget had ever known.

The auctioneer took Zinder's halter and led her, a symbol of apparent meekness, to Catuul Gras. The latter took the plaited rope as though it were likely to grow hot and looked somewhat stupidly at Ren.

"The sale price is on guarantee from the Galactic Bank," said the auctioneer. "The contract settlement is now between the purchaser and the city administration. Therefore I have no need to detain you, except to remind you of the convention that the title of the bond must be registered at the prefecture by within seven hours or the money is forfeit and the bond is returned to the city administration."

"I understand," said Catuul Gras. "I assure you the bond will be duly registered within the time."

Ren said nothing, not being able to trust himself to speak. Having been tricked into authorizing such an astronomical sum on the acquisition of a single female slave, he knew that the blackest hour of his career was upon him. An error in his judgment had caused this embarrassment to happen. He had been certain above all things that the *Imaiz* would not allow Zinder to be bought over his head. Now the wizard was standing both pleased and apparently unworried as Zinder was led away by the hands of his sworn enemies. Ren was still not convinced that the *Imaiz* would allow it to happen, but failed to see how he could prevent it—unless by some ambush or deception Dion managed to stop the bond's being registered in time.

Catuul's mind was apparently working along the same lines. He signaled members of his clan out from the crowd and sent them ahead to see that the roads Zinder and her new owners had to travel were free from possible trouble. With practiced inconspicuousness the little group melted away.

"I think," said Catuul, "that we had best pick up the director and get the registration over as soon as possible. That is—" he glanced uneasily at the radiant Zinder—"assuming that you wish to go through with it."

"For that sort of money," said Ren ruefully, "the deal had better be legally complete. Though the devil knows how it's going to look on the account books." Despite the immensity of his blunder the humor of the situation overwhelmed him and he started to chuckle spasmodically at his own discomfort.

THE assembled crowd was beginning to disperse with much laughter and amused speculation. Not a few came to have a closer look at Zinder wearing the customary bondage halter. For a moment Ren felt angered by what he regarded as morbid curiosity. But when he saw the proud and dominant strength in Zinder's face he realized that on the end of the halter was a powerful social catalyst. What he was parading through the streets was the anachronistic shame of Anharitte's slave trade. He and the Pointed Tails were being used to underscore the unfairness and absurdity of the system. While he was agent for the titular master, it was obviously the slave who held command of the situation and the hearts of the onlookers.

Thinking deeply in this vein, Ren walked ahead. Catuul followed, leading Zinder on the halter as if she were any common beast. Four of the Pointed Tails armsmen acted as a guard detail and also carried the torches, which were just needing to be lit as the purple dusk closed down. Ren found the journey acutely embarrassing. His civilized instincts prompted him to make conversation with Zinder, whose intellectual talents were probably more than equal to his own. But the halter she wore about her neck made such an action seem incongruous and he could think of no topic of conversation that could span the dual standards that had been thrust upon him.

He therefore stalked ahead of the group, growing increasingly angry at his own inability to resolve the conflict within himself. He sensed in the situation the ingenuity of the *Imaiz* in attacking the slave problem in this particular way and his respect for the wizard increased considerably. The *Imaiz* was forming a schism not only in society but also deep in the psyches of individual participants—such as himself. It was a dangerous and powerful game, and Ren knew that if Dion-daizan were not stopped he would ultimately win the battle.

Magno Vestevaal was waiting in Ren's chambers. The director had been drinking liberally, presumably celebrating a victory that had not been won. Ren roused him from his chair, knowing the worst had best be told without delay.

"We have to go immediately to the prefecture to register the bond."

"Register?" Vestevaal's eyes refocused on Ren in an instant. "What the hell do you mean?"

"I mean that the *Imaiz* played with us as he might with fools. You now own Zinder."

"Own Zinder?" Vestevaal appeared to sober himself by a tre-

mendous effort of will. "I see! And how much did this—ah—acquisition cost us, Tito?"

"Fourteen barrs to the tenth power," said Ren, being deliberately obtuse to soften the shock.

"What in hell is that in terms of money?"

Ren bent over his office calculator and converted the figures first to duodecimal galactic credits and then to the Terran ten-based notation which the director handled more happily. Vestevaal watched him steadily, sensing in Ren's actions a certain reticence that foretold of trouble.

"Well?"

Ren had finished the calculations and was examining the printout, wondering how to present it in the best light.

"You'd better sit down again," he said. "Would you believe about two hundred million million Solar dollars?"

For a moment the director appeared in danger of suffering a seizure. At last he swore. "You could buy two battle cruisers for less. Tito—have you any idea how I'm going to explain that sort of expenditure to the Freetrade Council? What are you trying to do—ruin me?"

"No, but I think it's a reasonable certainty that the *Imaiz* is. He promised to teach you a lesson. I guess this is it. But I still think we've hit him where it hurts. After all, we've got Zinder."

"Where is she?" asked Vestevaal. The color was slowly coming back into his cheeks. "Do you have her?"

"She's outside with Catuul and the guard."

"Then fetch her in—fetch her in! Where's your hospitality, Tito? It's not every day you get the chance to entertain somebody who's worth more than all your Company executives rolled into one.

Ren called for Zinder. Unlike Ren, Magno Vestevaal was in no doubt as to how she should be treated. He borrowed Ren's sword to cut the halter from her neck, then handed her into a chair as though she were a queen. She took the incident completely unabashed. Already she seemed to have established with Vestevaal a degree of rapport that reached to depths Ren could not envision. She accepted wine and fell into a quiet conversation with the director until Ren was forced to interrupt, fearing that if they further delayed they would become overdue for registering her bond.

The remainder of the journey to the prefecture was in marked contrast with that from the slave market. Magno Vestevaal led the way, engaged in earnest con-

versation with the slave girl on his arm, while Ren and Catuul followed disconsolately at their heels. The four armsmen had dispersed themselves fore and aft of the group, swords drawn and ready for trouble, since Catuul still feared an ambush or an interference designed to delay the registration of the bond. The director, however, ridiculed the idea of potential trouble and refused even to remain consistently within the shield of guards. He was right—inasmuch as they arrived at the grim portals of the prefecture without any sign of unwanted intervention.

VIII

THE prefecture was bustling with people. Watchmen were returning or departing on duty—clerks were fetching and carrying their massive volumes and a small mob around the slave registry was presumably waiting to see the registration of Zinder. Ren was not surprised to see Barii, the *Imaiz's* slave-caste steward in the group—and Dion-daizan himself. Everyone turned to watch as the director and his costly prize came across the threshold.

Dion-daizan made a bow of courtesy to Magno Vestevaal, which the latter good-humoredly returned. The director seemed in remarkably good spirits, having regained his equilibrium completely after his shock of learning of Ren's transaction. His reaction to Dion-daizan was an acknowledgment of the excellence of his adversary. Dion's respect was no less evident. Both men turned to regard Zinder, who stood peacock-proud watching the register clerk intently as he painstakingly wrote the details of her bondage on a new page of his mammoth book.

Di Irons came out of his office and took charge of the proceedings. His manner suggested that it was important for the peace of the city that the registration went smoothly. The prefect inspected the entry carefully, held it up for Dion-diazan to examine, then called for the mark of the auctioneer to authenticate the sale.

Catuul went suddenly tense. He had momentarily lost sight of Barii, but finally located him standing behind the *Imaiz*, who had retired discreetly to the rear. Like Ren, the

scribe had the gravest doubts that the *Imaiz* would permit the registration to be completed, but it was difficult to see how he could now prevent its finalization. Everyone in the room felt the tension rise and additional watchmen came out from some dark antechamber to stand silent and ready for trouble.

After the auctioneer had made his mark several statutory witnesses followed—Mallow Rade came to sign on behalf of the Pointed Tails. It was then Vestevaal's turn to sign as the ultimate purchaser. Such a succession of names was not usually required, but Di Irons was taking no chances. Necessity demanded that this was one registration that could never be disputed.

Vestevaal was aware that he could be altering the course of history on Roget as he took out his pen. He was buying a legend for hard cash, and the implication of the completed deal was that even enlightenment had its price. This was not, he reflected ruefully, the first time nor was Roget the first world on which that lesson had been learned. As he turned from the book he could not resist flashing a look of triumph in the direction of Dion-daizan. In return he received a polite smile, which might have signified resignation—but probably did not.

The director turned and held out his hand, indicating that Zinder should walk before him. Then a gasp of amazement from the onlookers diverted his attention back to the register. To his astonishment he saw the lines of ink begin to smoke and spread out, charring the surrounding paper. Some potent chemical reaction caused a glow that quickly became a flame that ran up the angled page—and though Vestevaal seized another volume and beat upon the burning book, he succeeded only in completely breaking up the fragile ash, which further disintegrated of its own volition.

ALL eyes turned accusingly to the *Imaiz*, then back to Di Irons, wondering how the situation was going to be resolved. The prefect, a cloud of smoke still about his startled head, growled in a voice like thunder and savagely pulled the book toward him as he brushed away the burned edges.

"Dion-daizan—I take it this is some work of yours."

"Mine?" The *Imaiz* sounded shocked. "There are ten good people between myself and the book—and have been all evening. Likewise, my servant Barii has not approached the proceedings. I could have had no more to do with the loss of the entry than—say—

Agent Ren had with the loss of the title I once owned."

"You make a good point," said Di Irons, glancing sourly at Ren, who had come forward to examine the burned page of the register. "The question is, what's to be done now?"

"Who claims the title to Zinder?" asked the *Imaiz*. His voice, though soft, carried perfectly.

"I do, of course," said Vestevaal.

"Then I contest your title to the bond. I submit that at this moment you can no more prove your ownership than could I a short while after Zinder was taken from me."

"There must have been a thousand witnesses to my purchase tonight." Vestevaal was adamant. "I demand that the registration begin anew."

"You have a thousand witnesses, but all Anharitte knew for ten years that Zinder belonged to me. Whose evidence is the stronger?"

"Stop this!" thundered Di Irons. "Dion, I shall have many words to say to you concerning your conduct this night. And you, Director, and your puppet Ren, are beginning to tire my patience. In the circumstances—I can see that the *Imaiz* has a valid point. Your situation is no different from his a little while ago. If justice is to be done I think the case should be treated in the same way."

"What does that mean?" asked Vestevaal sharply.

"If you wish, Director, your society can contest my decision in the supreme court at Gaillen. I advise you now that it would be a waste of time to do so, with the *Imaiz* so closely attentive to his own claims. But my own ruling is this: it's the considered opinion of the prefecture that the bondship of Zinder still has no clear tenure. Under the law it is therefore my duty to impound the slave girl in question and return her to the market for public auction. I have no more to say on the subject."

"But I have," said Vestevaal angrily. "I've paid a great sum of money for that girl. Do I not get that back?"

"What? You squeal because your agents forced a bad bargain?" Di Irons was cuttingly acid. "Come now! As a merchant you're fully aware that all purchases in Anharitte are on the basis of *caveat emptor*—let the purchaser beware. Ren was warned by myself most specifically not to proceed with the gambit. And I'm sure your reputation for trade on this planet would be little helped by your continuing such a claim. Especially—" he leaned forward heavily—"since the money was provided by the Freetrade Council for the express purpose of causing civil mischief in

Anharitte. Do you care to take that matter to court, Director? I doubt the planetary government would view the proceedings with much favor."

Vestevaal appeared on the verge of making a critically harsh reply. Then he looked at Zinder. She met his gaze with level inquiry, as if searching for something she expected to find in him. Vestevaal reacted with sudden resolutions—a smile of tired humor lit his face.

"My apologies, Prefect. I spoke out of turn. Of course I respect your ruling on both counts. Never let it be said that Magno Vestevaal doesn't know how to accept defeat with dignity."

Vestevaal turned to Zinder and kissed her hand, then bowed to Dion-daizan. He turned to Ren and Catuul Gras and indicated that they all should leave.

"Well, Tito—how's that for being outclassed?" Vestevaal's voice held a note of genuine appreciation. "I've seen some rank skulduggery among the Freetraders, but believe me, Dion-daizan makes the rest of them look like amateurs. Damn it—I'd love to see him on the council!"

"Are we going to take the debt for Zinder without fighting?" asked Ren.

"We have no alternative. We dare not go to court lest we sour the attitude of the planetary government toward Freetrade. You know how parochial these hick-world governments can be."

"This makes me wonder if there's a collusion between the *Imaiz* and the prefect."

"I don't think so. Di Irons is the straightest man I've ever come across. But he's trying to use unsophisticated laws to control a situation with which even sophisticated laws would find it difficult to cope. So he compensates by applying a good measure of rough horse-sense. And why shouldn't he? It's just that sort of approach that keeps Anharitte the place it is. And at least he's helped to cut our losses."

"I don't follow that."

Vestevaal laughed heartily and clapped Ren on the back.

"My dear Tito, you're too damn sober. Don't you realize that without Zinder we've one less mouth to feed and back to clothe. And there's a further problem you haven't even thought of. Suppose we had retained her—what the hell would we have found to do with her?"

The following day Zinder was again put up for sale. The *Imaiz* took up the bidding and this time nobody opposed him. The hammer fell at the price of one bar. And this was perhaps the final irony.

TO BE CONTINUED

ROBERT F. YOUNG

He dared to worship deities who did not dare to let him live!

WHOM THE GODS LOVE

The discovery of contemporary gods on other planets occasioned a concerted inquiry into Earth's past that threw new light on the "legendary" gods of old. The Greek and the Asgard pantheons acquired new dimensions and even history at last admitted that, ages ago, Zeus and company had dwelled upon the slopes of Mount Olympus—and that in

times of old, Odin had really sat on the high-seat in Hlidskjalf.

The provenance of the gods was another matter. The dead ones could not talk and the living ones could be contacted only through their worshipers who, quite understandably, dared not risk offending them by voicing impious questions. The present consensus is that they are the scattered remnants of a once-great galactic race whose heyday predates the dawn of man. Such an opinion would seem to impugn their divinity. That it does not merely points up the psychological need of the average mortal to stand in awe of beings ostensibly nobler than himself, whether they be true gods, savior-kings or Kennedys.

—Zyre: *What is a God?*, pp. 261-2

IF THERE were any Nief'i installations on Northstar 19, Recon Officer Hale could not find them. True, no one had said definitely that there were—only that there might be. But it was Hale's job to eliminate might-be's, which explains his presence in the skies of the polestar's nineteenth planet.

But although he found no enemy installations, he found something else: four cities. They stood on the banks of an eccentric river that snaked its way across a verdant plain dominated by a shining mountain—and all of them were dead.

No time limit had been imposed on Hale's Northstar 19 mission and he certainly was in no hurry to get back to the Earth-Nief'i War. So he decided to find out what kind of cities they were, or rather, what kind of cities they had been. He chose the one nearest the mountain (for some reason the mountain fascinated him) and brought his recon-craft down in the middle of its central square. He opened the locks and climbed down to the ground.

Stone edifices, some still intact, others with fallen walls and collapsed roofs, stared at him in the midmorning sunlight. Both their size and design indicated they had been built by men like himself. He took a deep breath of the unpurified air, smelled the greenness of trees and grass and the dust of desuetude. He was suddenly glad he had come.

He had memorized the city's conformation during his descent and knew that the square was on the crest of a hill. The buildings beyond had been built upon the hillside and stood in a wide band around the base. On the east the city was bor-

dered by the river, on the south by a forest and on the west by a park or graveyard. To the north the ruins gradually gave way to grassy lowlands, which once upon a time, no doubt, had known the bite of plowshares.

The architecture of the buildings forming the square had a Hellenic flavor. The arch was nowhere in evidence, and columns and entablatures prevailed. One of the buildings brought the Parthenon to mind; although the resemblance was superficial at best. A huge statue stood before the columned entrance. Perhaps it was the way the morning sunlight struck it, turning it to gold, that made Hale's interest leap—perhaps it was the haughty aspect of the lofty head. In either case, he walked across the square and stood before it. It was the statue of a goddess.

Unlike the columns, which were limestone, she had been sculptured of granite. A few faded streaks of dye informed him that her hair was black. It fell to her shoulders, disciplined only by a band worn around her forehead. Breast plates, metallic skirt and thonged sandals completed her attire.

He looked up at this comely granite girl, this stone goddess of the long legs, the bursting breasts, the Grecian arms and shoulders. Her face made him think of Byron and Keats. It expressed what they had been trying to say. The quick sweep of nose from high wide forehead to upper lip spoke of strength—the sensuous yet noble mouth somehow suggested a knowledge of the weakness of men. The girlish chin was godly. Once, no doubt, painted pupils had lent life to her sightless eyes. Time had taken it away.

He brought his own eyes down to the base of the pedestal on which she stood. There was writing there, etched meticulously into the stone. Picture writing. There was a word that looked like a plow, one that looked like a sword. One that looked like a snake probably symbolized the river. There was a word that looked like a tree, three that looked like stars. There was one that suggested the city—

At length he came to her name:

Entering the temple—for such it proved to be—he found that with the exception of one feature it was devoted entirely to her. The exception stood just within the entrance—a great granite statue of Herculean symmetry and grace whose stern countenance, albeit

beardless, suggested Zeus. Unquestionably it represented the major deity. Nevertheless, this was not his temple—it was  's.

Statues of her were everywhere—statues, statuettes and busts. Some were carved of limestone, some of granite—others were cast in bronze. The central floor space was given over to two parallel rows of stone benches, an aisle running down between them to a granite altar flanked by two bronze braziers black with age.

In a number of places the roof had fallen in and Hale had to pick his way around piles of fallen masonry to reach the altar. He halted before it. A life-size statue of  stood just behind it. This one had eyes and wore a dress. The dress half-covered the full breasts and fell but little lower than the hips. The eyes were represented by ice-blue chips of glass.

He found them disconcerting.

As he stood staring into their cold and glittering depths the conviction overcame him that he himself was being observed. Not from within the temple or even from the adjacent buildings—but from afar.

He tried to rid himself of the feeling, but it would not go away.

Before leaving the temple, he looked once more at the towering statue just within the entrance. This time, he examined the pedestal. It, too, was covered with ideographs. At length he found the one that stood for the deity's name:

OUTSIDE, he made his way down the hillside to the lower city. Here the broken buildings were fewer, while partly filled-in depressions marked the cellars of wooden dwellings that had long ago either fallen or burned to the ground. Clearly this was the section of the poor.

He felt more at home here than on the hill.

The conviction that he was being observed intensified, but the feeling now was of being watched from nearby rather than from afar. It was possible, he supposed, that some of the buildings were inhabited. Both the reconcraft's polimeter and its sentience detector were reliable instruments—but the former responded only to reasonably large groups of structures, while the latter could not detect the presence of intelligent life forms except in reasonably large groups (specifically, the minimum number of structures and the minimum amount of personnel the Nief'i would need to establish an effective military installation). Nevertheless, Hale found it hard to believe that anyone abided in the city. It did not

matter in any case: the Nief'i could be discounted altogether (they abhorred human cities), and the high-intensity incandescer strapped to Hale's right wrist would be more than a match for anything a bronze-age semi-savage might throw or thrust at him.

He spent the rest of the day poking among the ruins. They fascinated him. He found potteryshards, blackened utensils and bones. Most of the bones seemed to be those of women and children, but as a layman he could not, of course, be certain. Once he caught a blur of movement at the edge of his vision, but although he turned his head quickly he saw nothing.

He skipped lunch. For supper he ate a can of synthichicken and half a loaf of canned bread and drank a thermopint of ale. The ale made him drowsy and he partially dozed afterward as he sat in the reconcraft lock, watching the blue mists of evening creep down from the plain. He decided to stay the night and perhaps the morrow too. Why not? The war could get on without him for another day. From what he had learned thus far he felt sure the ruins were remnants of a once-prosperous and powerful city-state on the order of Athens or Lacedaemon. Perhaps, years ago, the four cities had engaged in an internecine "Peloponnesian War" that had left but few survivors. Among the stars man had already found a hundred histories of himself—here, perhaps, was another.

WHEN the valley filled with night, Hale closed the locks and climbed up into the little cabin in the reconcraft's nose. He undressed, turned out the light and lay down on his bunk. On the opposite bulkhead an oval porthole looked out upon the crumbling cornices of the higher edifices. He lay helpless in the dark, waiting for Gwendolyn to come into his mind. He and she had met years earlier at a posh beach resort, where he had been employed as a swimming instructor. All summer long they had been lovers and after she had returned to her home in Greater Philadelphia he had traveled more than five hundred miles to pay her a surprise visit. The season had been late September, hazy-hot, and he had perspired as he walked up the wide shaded walk to the patio-portico that fronted the rambling neo-renaissance house. In the columned coolness tall young men and tall young women had lolled, tall cool glasses in their hands. He remembered a flurry of movement, a blur of color as he had come into sight from the shade. A door had opened and slammed shut. He had wanted to turn around and go back, but

had been unable. He had had to keep walking until he had come to the marble steps and asked the question whose false answer still burned in his mind. *Gwen?* One of the tall young men had answered, ice cubes tinkling as he talked. *Oh, she got suddenly called away.*

Away, away, away . . .

Tonight as on other nights he waited and waited, but she did not come and at last he closed his eyes. He could see the ruins. They drifted past his inner vision like gray sheep. He counted them and presently he slept.

AWAKENING deep in the night, he lay in the darkness searching his mind for the reason sleep had fled. He could not find it.

At last he got up, stepped over to the porthole and looked through the thick glass down into the square. All three of Northstar 19's moons were in the sky. The flagstones were silver in the multi-moonlight and the broken buildings stood like argent ghosts. Shadows played along their feet, making evanescent patterns in the night. At first he thought his mind was projecting an image of Gwen, but he knew instantly that the girl standing in the square was not—could not be—she. This was someone else altogether, yet someone he was sure he knew. He saw first of all the blazing blackness of her hair and then he saw the nightflower of her face. Gradually her body took shape in the multiple light—he saw the shining hillocks of her breasts, the silver pillars of her legs, the pale shadow of her pubic hair. The pillars quivered in the multi-moonlight, subtly faded away. When he searched the shadows for her face it was no more—her black hair blended back into the night. And the square slept in the multi-moonlight, dreamed in the multi-moonlight and all was as it had been before.

He stepped back across the little room and dropped down again on his bunk. He lay with his hands clasped behind his head, thinking. Whoever had been in the square was not a ghost. Ghosts did not haunt dead poleis.

But sometimes tutelary gods did.

THE next morning Hale had a look at the building before which his nocturnal visitor had stood. It told him nothing.

The day was golden, the air sparkling with particles of dispersed dew. Beyond the ruins, treetops twinkled in a sporadic morning wind. After a light breakfast, he went back down into the lower city and resumed his unofficial investigation of the ruins. He found more pottery shards,

more blackened utensils and more bones.

He also found a second Temple of [illegible]

It stood on the southern outskirts, at the feet of the forest that climbed the valley's slope to the plain. It was larger than its sister on the hill and this, together with its location, led him to conclude it had been built expressly for the poor.

Going inside, he found it like its sister both within and without. There were more benches and the altar at the end of the aisle was larger. But the altar statue was the same.

Down front was a girl, sitting on one of the benches. A girl clad in bronze armor, with a forehead band encircling her black hair.

Hale was not surprised. He had never seen a goddess, but he knew he was seeing one now. He also knew, from history, that Athena Polias had haunted ancient Athens long after her true worshipers had turned to dust.

If Athena Polias had haunted her dead polis, why couldn't [illegible] haunt hers?

HE WALKED down the aisle, through slanted columns of sunlight, around piles of fallen stone. She did not turn her head.

When he reached the bench she was sitting on he sat down beside her, not because he dared to, but because he didn't know what else to do.

She faced him and he saw the quick sweep of nose from high wide forehead to upper lip and the goddlike girlish chin. Her eyes surprised him. He had expected to find ice in them—instead he found the summer skies of Earth.

In contrast her hair made him think of the blackness of winter forests—its disarray of the wind on a winter's night.

She said, *I've been waiting for you since dawn.*

She had spoken into his mind. He found he could speak into hers. *You watched me all day yesterday. Why didn't you reveal yourself to me then?*

I revealed myself to you last night.

Yes, he said, *but not as you are now. Why did you wait so long?*

Your mind has a wall around it, like mine. I could not see inside.

Can you see inside it now?

Only a little—not enough to tell me where you really came from or who you really are. But I decided to contact you anyway.

I'm glad, he said. *I've a lot of questions to ask. About you and about your city-state.*

There were three other poleis like it, as you no doubt know. Many years ago they grew envious of one

another and engaged in a long and disastrous war. The final battle was fought upon the plain. The women fought beside the men—those who had not been murdered along with their children in successive rapes of the four cities.

Were there no survivors?

A few. They became shepherds and live far away beyond the mountain and the plain. They blame the cities for their misfortune—they regard them as places of evil and will not live in them any more.

But as a goddess—surely you could have ended such a war.

[illegible] decreed that the gods were not to interfere.

Is [illegible] your father?

In a way he is, she said. *He and his mate [illegible] rule the world. I have three brothers and three sisters. My three sisters were the guardian goddesses of the other city-states. There are other pantheons, but they are inferior to ours.*

Where do you live? Hale asked.

We live high upon the mountain that looks down upon the plain. I thought you knew.

I guessed, Hale said, *but I didn't know.*

I saw you from the mountain when you arrived. [illegible] stood up. Her armor was not new, he noticed. In places it had worn thin. *I must go now.*

One of the thongs of her sandals was broken. He kneeled and knotted the ends together, then stood up beside her. *Please don't go yet.*

I must. I'll come back tomorrow—perhaps tonight. Would you like to see the battlefield? I'll take you there. You seem inordinately interested in bones and it's not far from here.

Take me there now.

I can't. I'll take you there tomorrow. Perhaps tonight.

She stepped sideways, slipped from sight. He stared at where she had stood. Oddly, her absence brought home to him more forcibly than had her presence the fact that she was a goddess, and momentarily he was overcome by awe. For a while he found it difficult to believe that he had not dreamed the meeting. But in the end he knew that it had been real and that he would see her again.

HE SKIPPED his midday meal again and went on a tour of the river bank. The Earth-Nief'i War seemed to recede with every step he took. It had less reality for him now than the one that had taken place here on Northstar 19—how many years ago? He felt suspended between present and past.

Stone wharves protruded into the river. He walked out on one of them, sat down in the sunlight and

let his legs hang over the water. The current was sluggish, almost imperceptible, and the river, wide at this point, brought to his mind a blue lake. Once the simile became fixed in his mind it was inevitable that he should see the raft. Even so, he found it odd that Gwendolyn should enter his reverie when she was so far backstage from the proscenium of his thoughts.

The raft was anchored in the middle of the lake. There were two people on it. Beyond their golden glistening bodies a distant frieze of summer homes showed against a blue terrestrail sky.

Hale looked but little different then from how he was now. Tall and spare, almost beautiful in his virile handsomeness. Gwen was a flaming nymph in the sunlight. When they went out together he always had trouble wearing clothes. He worked hard at it and achieved a degree of aptitude—but the poor look well dressed only to the penniless and he knew that in her eyes he was a store-window mannikin on parade. On the raft it was different. Nearly naked in the sun he was her peer and she accepted him as such. More important—he accepted himself as such.

She had said she loved him as they walked one moonlit night along the shore, the waves fainting at their feet. Her words had been more than a declaration of love—they had been an invitation. He had been accustomed to such invitations, but he had found this one disconcerting. Later, in the dark boathouse, he had been more disconcerted yet—and hurt as well—to find he was not the first and possibly not even the second or the third. But his disenchantment had not lasted and by the end of the summer he had been more deeply in love with her than he had been before. *Maturely in love . . .* had been the way he had expressed it to himself. What he had felt toward her before had been mere boyish infatuation. It wasn't finding out that the rich were like everybody else that wrecked poor-boy lover—it was finding out that the truth had no effect upon his fascination.

THE raft went away and the river came back, and a flock of heronlike birds rose from the reeds and flapped across the stream to the opposite bank where the frieze of summer homes had been. Hale liked the river better, found Northstar's warmth more comforting than Sol's. Perhaps here was where he belonged.

HE KILLED the rest of the afternoon wandering over the grassy lowlands and returned to the reconcraft at dusk. He had no ap-

petite, but he forced himself to eat. Then he walked through the ruins to the lower-city temple of [illegible].

The temple was empty. He walked down the aisle and sat on the bench where they had met. As he sat there in the silence the first moon climbed into the sky and sent her silver footprints down the aisle, then withdrew them to shine down through the crevices in the roof. The second moon arose and she too made obeisance at the altar before looking down from above. He knew that it was growing late, remembered that [illegible] had said "perhaps" she might be there. But he went on sitting in the silver silence, hoping.

She did not come. He stood up at last, dumb with disappointment, and walked out into the night. The third moon was climbing up the star-runged ladder of the east and the light of night was as the light of day. He wandered among the ruins. Passing a megalithic platform, he pictured a politician standing on it, making promises to the poor.

Presently he came to a garden, passed through its gate and sat down in the multi-moonlight. A little distance away a waterless fountain stood like a silver centerpiece. Weeds grew riotously around his feet. Suddenly he heard her step and saw her just beyond the garden wall. She came through the garden gate, her armor blazing, her black hair gleaming in the night.

You weren't in the temple, she said. *Then I saw you sitting here.*

He said, *I waited for you for hours. I thought you weren't coming.*

She said, *I'll take you to the battlefield.*

He walked with her through the ruins and they climbed the forested slope to the plain. They walked over the plain in the multi-moonlight, the shining mountain rising on their right. Around them herds of wild livestock slept. Ululations sounded from far away.

They circumvented a quarry that had become an artesian lake and came at last to a huge circular depression bordered by sprucelike trees. She halted just beyond the fringe of trees and he halted beside her. He looked into her summer-sky eyes, silvery now—at the wild blackness of her hair. A trembling began in his hands. He said, *Let me count the ways . . .*

She looked back at him, puzzled. *The wall around your mind has grown higher. What is it you do not wish me to see?*

Nothing, he said. *Is this the battlefield?*

Yes. The Cwm of the Dead.

He saw the bones. They began at his feet, spread outward, littering the entire basin. Interspersed

among them were battered shields, broken swords, bits and pieces of armor—all black with age. Oddly, he was reminded of the utensils he had dug up.

Surely the gods could have averted such a tragedy.

No, [illegible] said. *We could not avert it because we* were *gods. The people of my polis prayed to me to bring them victory, while the people of my sisters' poleis prayed to them to bring them victory. Thus* [illegible] *decreed as he did.*

But he *could have stopped it.*

Only at the expense of creating dissension among the gods and this he would not do. Thus he decreed as he did, fully aware of the consequences. Since the war we have become gods without worshipers. The survivors have turned their backs on us and have taken to worshiping savior kings. We no longer know what it is like to be adored. I no longer know what it is like.

I adore you, Hale said.

She turned toward him. *Yes, but in a different way.* She stepped closer to him, her gaze warm upon his face. He found her hand in his. It was like the moonlight, light, cool and soft—and somehow the three qualities passed from her palm through his and became commingled with his blood, apotheosizing him. He found himself kissing her in the multi-moonlight, the women he had known before her transmuting to glass beads on a cheap necklace in his mind, Gwen the gaudiest zircon of them all.

And yet it was he who pulled away. *We have no right to make love here,* he said. *Not in the Cwm of the Dead.*

In the beginning Love met Death in the dark woods of the world and found him to be her twin.

I have no right to make love to you in any case.

Why?

He stared at her. *Because—*

He saw that she had turned and was pointing across the battlefield. *We are about to be attacked. Look.*

There were five of them. Wolves. Not the kind he was familiar with, but enough like them to justify the term. They were loping across the cwm, spreading outward as they came. [illegible] 's right arm was already extended—now she extended her fingers and white fire leaped from their tips. The lead wolf became a gout of flame. But the remaining four did not even slow their pace. [illegible] 's second thunderbolt missed. Hale extended his own right arm. Two tongues of blue and brilliant flame seemed to leap from his fingertips and the two foremost wolves disintegrated.

[illegible] incinerated the fourth—and the fifth, badly singed, retreated into the night.

THEY walked back across the plain in the multi-moonlight holding hands, their shoulders touching now and then, the three moons slipping swiftly down the western slope of night. The moment they entered the forest she unclasped her armor and let it fall to the ground. Then she pulled him into a flower-carpeted arbor and drew him down upon her. *Not once,* she whispered. *Not once, but a thousand times* . . . A golden ladder appeared from somewhere and he climbed it high into the sky. There was a bursting in his brain—the ladder trembled and he fell. He climbed it again, this time even higher into the sky, only to fall once more, white fires burning in his brain.

He did not know how many times he climbed and fell. He did not care. Toward morning they made their way down through the forest and halted before the lower-city temple. *I must go now,* she said. He pulled her tightly against him, tried to imprison her with his arms. *No, not yet. I may never see you again!* Her body trembled, lost substance. In a moment only the ghost of her remained. And then even the ghost was gone, but not before he heard it whisper, *You are the first real god I have ever known!*

He was thunderstruck.

HE STOOD in the fading moonlight, staring at where she had been.

You are the first real god I have ever known. . .

She had seen him ride down from heaven on a huge and shining "steed" such as she had never dreamed of. She had seen him unleash "thunderbolts" more powerful than her own. She, who had probably entered hundreds of unsophisticated mortal minds, had encountered a wall when she tried to enter his.

She had mistaken him for a god from the beginning. A god, perhaps, from one of the other pantheons.

The rosy-fingered dawn had drawn a pink line along the eastern horizon. Hale walked slowly back to the reconcraft, climbed into the control room and sat down.

In a way, he *was* a god.

True, there were billions of other gods like him. But they did not dwell on Northstar 19 and never would.

The first golden fingers of the sun reached through the locks and extended themselves toward his feet. He had always thought his feet were made of clay. He saw now that they were not.

He stood up. His shoulders seemed to brush the sky. The fading stars hovered inches from his head.

The intra-fleet communicator came to life. "Fleet Com to Recon Two. Acknowledge, RC Hale."

Hale looked down from his eminence at the picayune reminder of his past.

"Repeat: FleetCom to Recon Two. Acknowledge, RC Hale. If unable to acknowledge, then return FleetCom immediately."

"I'm not going back," Hale said.

"What has gone wrong, Recon Officer Hale? Repeat: What has gone wrong?"

"I'm a god," Hale said. "I'm agoing to live among my own kind."

He got a pipe wrench out of the tool cabinet and smashed the communicator's face.

He closed the locks and raised the reconcraft high above the dead city.

They wouldn't come looking for him—he wasn't that important. But even if they did they would never find him.

He pointed Pegasus toward the mountain.

The mountain came to meet him and high up on its shining slopes he saw the marble columns of the hall of the gods. He guided Pegasus down from the sky, brought her to rest on the slope below and dismounted.

He began walking up the slope in the hot sunlight. He started to sweat. Did gods perspire? He wondered. It seemed like an uncouth trait for a god.

The hall was huge, he saw as he neared it. Some of its columns had fallen. Its roof had collapsed in places. Clearly the gods were having a hard time shifting for themselves. But he would help them. He would use his technological powers to help them rebuild the hall, remold it into the magnificent structure it had been before.

They had come out of the hall and were standing before the columned entrance, waiting to welcome him. He saw tall and mighty [illegible]. He saw stately [illegible]. He saw [illegible]'s handsome brothers and sisters.

He saw [illegible].

She had exchanged her armor for a white dress that barely covered her breasts and fell just below her hips. Her blue eyes glittered in the sunlight like shards of glass.

He was very close to the hall now. He thought it odd that his fellow gods did not come forth to greet him. Then he saw [illegible] raise his right arm, as though in salutation. He was about to raise his own in kind when a blast of brilliant blueness leaped from the deity's fingertips. The bolt passed over Hale's head and a moment later Pegasus vanished in a huge gout of flame.

The mountain trembled. A hot wind seared the slope.

Hale had halted horrified in his tracks. "You don't understand!" he screamed. He looked desperately at [illegible].

Tell them who I am! Tell them what I am!

[illegible] looked coldly back at him. *Kill him*! she said to [illegible].

[illegible] lowered his arm, extended fingers now pointed toward Hale's head. Hale flung himself frantically to the left and the bolt passed over his shoulder. Blinded by its brightness, he went rolling and scrambling down the slope. Stones rattled around him. His incandescer was torn from his wrist. When he reached the bottom of the slope he staggered to his feet and ran. A sound like the tinkling of ice cubes came from far above. It was the laughter of the gods.

AFTER a while his vision returned. He slowed his steps and began walking in the direction of the river. He did not reach it till late afternoon. He threw himself face down on the grassy bank and cupped water into his mouth. A low moan sounded from behind him. Turning, he saw the wolf.

He twisted his body into a sitting position. Instinctively he raised his arm. Then he remembered that his incandescer was no longer strapped to his wrist, that it had been irretrievably lost on the slope. He let his arm drop to his side.

The wolf did not move. Presently Hale realized that it had not followed him to the river, as he had at first assumed, but had been there before he arrived. He saw that its right flank was badly burned, and recognized it as the wolf [illegible]'s final thunderbolt had singed.

There was pain in the animal's eyes. Hale raised his arm again. This time, the wolf crept to his side and settled down beside him. He stroked its coarse fur, then lay back exhausted on the grass.

There were bound to be survivors living along the river. Eventually he would follow it far enough to find them. However much he might want to, he could not live alone. But he was not yet ready. First he must wait for his wound to heal, for the pain to go away.

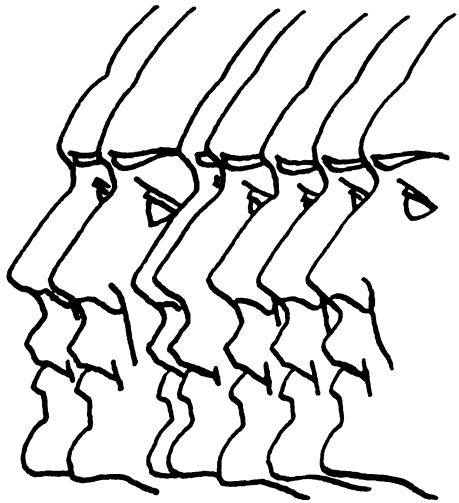
He closed his eyes and presently he slept. The gods looked down from above. But they did not see him—they saw only their reflections in the stream.

> *What is a god? A god is a being, mortal or immortal, who can with impunity doff his/her democratic mask the moment the need for it is past.*
>
> Op. cit., p. 346

●

DAVID MAGIL

The most terrifying life form in the universe was—himself!



9

WE WERE in trouble, bad trouble. The outer wall of our reactor had cracked. The thermal sealant had leaked in. It was burned up, gone. We had repaired the fault, policed the area, but in order to keep from exceeding our thermal limit and blowing, every liquid on board the ship had been poured into our tanks. It wasn't good enough. Power was evaporating the liquids. Temperatures on board were in excess of 108°F and they were building. Crew was down to minimal clothing, almost none. And the temperature was going to erase us. We didn't have any liquid for human consumption.

And we were 316 days from Emergency Base Extender.

My ship. Patroller 374. My captaincy: Colonel Jack L. Powers,

United Earth Patrol Forces. Purpose of journey: normal patrol operation. Special situation: Inspector-passenger, General of Patrol Forces, Eight-star Senoir Commander Rallfeld. Ship's state: Emergency 1.

I had reported to General Rallfeld. He had made no comment, given no advice. And I had no idea. We simply had no other liquids on board. And without liquids we could either go black and freeze or go on until we fusioned.

Temperature rose to 109°F.

And there was no place to head, no place to go. The area was Lacuna G 47832.

Crew working at maximum. All nonessential personnel confined to berths—minimal activity, attempt to add as little additional heat as possible.

Working crew was demanding power. Not verbally, but I could see the demand every time they looked at me. One burst of full power for three minutes would lift our temperature five degrees. Where to use it? A three-minute thrust toward Extender and maybe bring in a dead ship? A patrol ship was worth a fortune. Or a minute full-burst call to Extender requesting emergency rescue? Or a near search in case of remote possibility there was anything in area? G 47832 was largely uncharted. There might have been something within range.

"Weiss. Near search. One minute on full power. Commander, see that everything else is cut off. Quickly as possible, Weiss."

"Sir," he said and pushed his power call. I reached over and pushed "CONFIRM" on my console.

A twelve-second delay and the shot came through. I watched it on power control, I watched it on the thermometer. I watched it on the clock. The damned second hand just seemed to hang there—the P 4 register didn't. It was 140°F down there and I watched as it sped to 145,147,149.

"How far can we go in P four, Chief?"

"Two-eleven, Captain. Maybe. I'm not sure. But maybe to two-eleven."

We were three degrees up. Could hardly feel it. Just felt thirsty. No hope for that.

"Refrigeration off in J Seven, Captain."

"Anything for it?"

"Nothing, sir. That's directly above P Four. It was just a matter of time. You want perishables transferred, sir?"

"Commander? How much heat would we generate moving it to nearest refrigeration? Get the list. See if anything essential is in it."

"Power off, sir," the bosun told me.

"Fine. Weiss. Get that analysis as fast as you can."

"We're at one-fourteen, sir."

"Bad. Get me General Rallfeld. Advise him of our situation."

"Sir."

"Weiss. What the hell's happening? You have anything? What's taking so long?"

"Sorry, sir. The twenty-nine eighty-seven is slow."

"Who the hell gave you consent to use it? You're trained. Eye-read it! We're trying to save power, Mister."

"Sir, I don't know how to eye-read."

"You don't. . . Any one of you here trained to eye-read a scan chart? No? Okay, Mister. Use the twenty-nine eighty-seven. Try to use it fast, will you."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"Forget it. Just concentrate on what you can do."

"Sir."

I WANTED to get up and pace. But that would mean more heat. We couldn't afford it. Even thinking was too much of an expenditure. What we needed was stasis. I had always laughed at the experiments on preservation, biosuspensions. At Inter-Planetary Science Confederation Conferences I had voted against grants for such research. I regretted those votes now. I was on the verge of losing my ship, my men.

"Major, you been on to General Rallfeld?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any comment from him?"

"No, sir. He just thanked you for the courtesy and wishes you luck, sir."

"Yes. Get back to him. No, Let me. How much power is used on full ship auditory?"

"In thermals, a tenth of a degree, sir."

"What's our bio limit, Doctor?"

"We're at one-eighteen, Captain. At one-forty we'll begin to suffer severe impairment. I have the figures if you want them."

"Go ahead."

"We'll lose fifteen per cent in the next twenty-two degrees, sir. Twenty per cent for every accretion of five beyond that. Chance of utilizable surviving crew nonexistent by a hundred and sixty Fahrenheit."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"One nineteen, sir."

"Thank you, son." I thought for a minute. I'd keep it short. No encouragement. There surely wasn't anything encouraging. I reached over and switched on the auditory.

"Captain Powers here. Our situation is deteriorating. We're making every attempt to rectify it. We will keep you informed of any signifi-

cant developements. I'm speaking to you to ask if any of you have any memory of stories told you about Thermal Accelerate, any classroom studies, private investigations. If you have knowledge, information or ideas please report to Commander Rupler by auditory. Thank you." I turned to Weiss after switching off. "Anything?"

"Nothing yet, sir. There's nothing in one or two quadrant."

"Go ahead with it. Stay easy, son."

"Yes, sir."

We were up to 121°F.

"Captain. P Four is beyond human habitation."

"Thank you, Doctor. What goes next?"

"R Five, sir. We have crew there. Twenty-eight men, four women."

"Can we move them?"

"It's your command, sir."

"Very well. Let me know when they're dead."

"Yes, sir, Captain."

"Captain?" Weiss asked. "I think I have a radio signal. It's UHF. Fourth quadrant, degree area one-seventeen. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen—it's at sixteen hours. Mass. Mass? It's a planet, sir! Wait. There's VHF. Dozen, there are dozens—there are hundreds of radio transmitters, sir. It's an inhabited planet! An inhabited planet! It has intelligent life!"

"Easy, son. Verify, please."

"Yes, sir."

"Chief. What's our capacity to do sixteen hours?"

"We could do it, sir. Cut off everything. We could do it. We'd get there four or five before critical mass. We'd be dry."

"Doctor?"

"I'm checking it, Captain. Okay. Yes. It would take us up to one-fifty Fahrenheit—say fifty-five per cent mortality. Maybe down to fifty per cent if survivors can get liquids immediately on landing."

"Commander. Is there any record of an inhabited planet in this area?"

"None, sir."

"Captain. General Rallfeld to speak to you, sir."

"One minute. Okay. Prepare for full propulsion power. You have a confirm on that, Weiss?"

"Yes, sir. It's absolute. It's there. No mistake, Captain."

"All right. Prepare to go, gentlemen. We're getting out."

I reached up for the phone. To an eight-star I spoke privately. "General. This is Captain Powers."

"I'd like to see you in my quarters, Captain."

"General. We're in Emergency. We have just found an *I* planet at sixteen hours. I'm preparing to go for it. I don't feel I can leave my command at this moment, sir."

"I figured you'd find it. There's no sense in your going toward that planet, Captain. Get down here. Go or don't go on your fire command. It doesn't matter. But get down here. I'll explain when you do. That is an order."

"I don't understand, sir. Do you advise against my firing?"

"It doesn't matter, Captain. Nothing is going to save this ship. Might as well go for it. But give your command and then get down here."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Commander. Fire when you're ready. If you need me I'll be with the general."

Ben looked at me. I just shrugged. And I patted Weiss on his shoulder on the way out. I had a lot to live for. If there was any chance of living I was going to make it and my ship and my crew would make it with me.

"FIRING mode in three. Mark," came over the auditory. "Three, two, one."

I held on for it. It was a quick burst, minimum added G. I waited for any after kick. There was none.

It was damned hot down there in the passageway. I knocked. The general opened the door. His face was grim, taut. He was a lot of years my senior, one of the earliest patrollers, an almost legendary man. But he didn't look old. He also didn't look as if he were feeling the heat. Responsibility of command goes deep. We were probably the only two men aboard still in full uniform, the only two aboard using all our will power to keep our sweat glands from betraying that we felt the heat, too.

"General."

"Captain. Sit down. This *I* planet. From here it's fourth quadrant, degree one-seventeen?" he asked, going to his table and looking down at a chart.

"That's correct, sir. May I ask how you know that?"

"I've been following your progress, Captain. I would have come up and offered assistance if I'd known anything to help you. To the best of my knowledge and in the light of my experience I recommend that you cut off oxygen. Go black, Captain."

"We're still alive, sir."

"This planet we are now heading toward, Captain—I was the first man to make contact with it."

"You've been there, sir? But—"

"Easy, Captain. It's not on charts because it was removed from them by command decision. As you approach the planet, you have automatic gear that will signal nine. Condition nine."

"Nine means forbidden. Why, sir? And when? Why haven't we

gotten the signal by this time?"

"Because you're not using enough power to get distant scan. As you near—on any degree of power—the nine signal will come up."

"But this is Emergency One, sir."

"What does nine mean, Captain?"

"Approach forbidden under all circumstance, sir."

"Exactly. So what do you propose to do?"

"At this moment—with no alternative? I'll land, General. If we can get there why not try it? It means dying there or here."

"I don't think you will land. The planet we are approaching was once briefly listed as Rallfeld. I thought I was the discoverer. I first made contact, I thought. I believed I was the first man who landed. The inhabitants are a pretty extraordinary species, Captain. They have no form, none that I know. If they do they've never let us see it. The form they take is the sympathetic. If you were an elephant, Captain, you might find they all were elephants."

"They'll wear our form for us?"

"Yes. They can assume your form if they choose. Or they can assume the form of this starship or a fleet of starships. They could turn themselves into an army of patrollers. If that happened, in that army the brain duplication would have the imperative of getting home, Captain; getting back to Earth. Some of them, a million, ten million could turn themselves into weapons and then all it would take would be the move across space. You'll have on your mind Extender. They'll get to Extender. I think they are indestructable, Captain, and I know their only purpose is to destroy. What men once fantasied Mars was, what Sparta once was. . . Sir, this is the planet of war. And, Captain, if you land you will be risking the annihilation of Earth and perhaps of half the *I* planets in the universe."

"But you say that you landed."

"YES. They were quiescent then. Captain, things were different. I was just storming around, really an explorer, an adventurer more than a patroller. My orders were to go out to my fuel capacity and then turn around and head back. We weren't in trouble. We were in a normal mode. My chief spotted them. He yelled at me. Great excitement. Those days our contacts with other species—with *I* planets—were minimal and tremendously exciting. We were getting radio. We didn't believe it. And it wasn't a simple signal. They were jamming up every one of the bands.

"In those days our equipment was primitive, but we had equip-

ment. We tricked in on the signals and da go out to my fuel capacity and then turn around and head back. We weren't in trouble. We were in a normal mode. My chief spotted them. He yelled at me. Great excitement. Those days our contacts with other species—with I planets—were minimal and tremendously exciting. We were getting radio. We didn't believe it. And it wasn't a simple signal. They were jamming up the bands.

"In those days our equipment was primitive, but we had equipment. We tracked in on the signals and damn if they weren't coming from a planetary body. It was beyond our safe-reserve fuel allotment—but hell, if we could get to it I wanted to do so.

"So we moved for it. And we did a broad scan. You know how close the nearest star is, Captain? This is a true Lacuna. Hell, you can hardly see stars with your naked eye in this black. We searched. How the devil could you have a planet with a riot of radio coming from it—life on it—and no star? That didn't make sense. Until that time our every contact had been with similar life forms with similar needs. We really believed we were the dominant species in the universe. Hell, you saw a Zithythin and you hardly could tell him from a Swede. Their planets were like ours, their life forms all were. But we were coming to this planet and what the hell would they be?"

He stopped and seemed to be remembering. The cabin was hot. I wondered how much worse it was than before we had gone on power. It felt worse.

"Ships then were slow," he resumed. "We just inched across to them. Their radio signals strengthened. They weren't signaling out. The sounds were weird to our ears but we decided they were variations of a home-service radio. Music, entertainment, talk shows. We had an early version of the lingual transverter. We put it on the signals. It took a little time but it actually checked out. We were listening to disk jockeys and pop tunes. Just like home. A complex language. A language we would now classify as type N four-forty-one. Closest thing to it was Chinese, perhaps.

"We kept probing. First thing we hit was that the Lacuna wasn't always that. At one time they had over four thousand stars around one massive one. Of the four thousand stars, at least fifteen hundred had planetary systems. Everyone of those stars, Captain, was dead. They were cinders, all burned out."

"In one area? How? What happened?"

"Let me go on, Captain. One

hundred and twenty-six hours after our first contact we went into a distant orbit. From there we found no probes, no defenses, no electronic queries. They had radio but they were only using it for entertainment. Through our lingual transverter we sent down a query. We identified and requested permission to land. This obviously was a sophisticated planet. We received no response. In the meantime we did standard electronic probing, made quite difficult by the darkness. We found electricity, but no light. We found heat but no fire. We found elaborate cities, quite large cities. There were bodies of water, great mountains. The planet is twice the size of ours. We later discovered it maintains a population of one point eight billion.

"After repeated attempts to make contact or sense, we determined—or more properly I did—to make our landing. It was something very special, Captain. We came down on a field outside one of their largest cities. With no sun there shouldn't have been anything much—but, Captain, we came down in paradise. Our lights showed flora so lavish and rich in colors so exotic that it exceeded the best we have on Earth. There was—and this is difficult to describe to a professional—a peace, a calm. The air was our air. The temperature was balmy. A spring bubbled fifty yards from us and the water was pure. It was what Earth water probably was in the beginning. Beautiful, Captain.

"No one came out to greet us. We waited, but no one came. We carried rovers in those days. In violation of standing orders I relieved myself of command and with two of my men and our one semiportable transverter we drove into the city.

"INCREDIBLE city, Captain. All darkness. No windows on great buildings that soared beyond anything we had even imagined on Earth—architectural forms fabricated of materials so beautiful that we stopped to stare at walls. Paved streets, no street lamps, gutters, drains. Sizes made us feel the natives must be bigger than we were, but not considerably bigger. There were no lamp posts, no other lighting forms or facilities. The darkness, except where our lights probed, was total.

"We drove on. There were no vehicles in the streets. The streets were immaculate. Unbelievable place, Captain, absolutely unbelievable. There were no natives on the streets—we saw no animal life whatever. We kept going. Around every corner we discovered a new wonder. Then we reached the business section. Still no people,

which made us guess that it was perhaps their night. The stores had no display windows—you know what they had instead? They had radio and they had little boxes. The radio advertised—quietly it offered descriptions and prices. If you put your hands in the boxes you could feel the items or simulations of them. We were a little afraid but tried it. Difficult. If you've ever tried to identify even a familiar object in the darkness in one of those party games, you'll know how difficult it was—but totally fascinating, Captain. This feel thing—apparently they had even worked in out to replace movies. Feel a sound. They had no light. We had sensors and I swear to you we came up with zero photons. Nothing. Only our lights, our headlights, our spotlights—old ruby lasers.

"The place was—or seemed—deserted, abandoned. There was radio everywhere—even traffic control, believe it or not—but we came up with nothing. Equipment primitive by your standards, but not unsophisticated.

"And then, Captain, right off a massive central square—our lights turned as we did and suddenly we had in them an image of me. It wasn't quite perfect to my eyes. It was a slight variation, features copied but just perceptibly modified. But it was me.

"MY DRIVER called out: 'Jesus.' I told him to stop. I got out, holding my light on this doppelganger. I walked up to it slowly. It was dressed as I was with modifications, unfrightened as I was, curious as I was.

" 'Bring over the transverter—slowly' I called back to my men.

" 'Not necessary, Captain,' it said. It spoke our language even, Mister Powers. It even had that.

" 'Who are you?'

" 'An official. I'm a guide in this instance. You are a patroller from the planet Earth. Please, would you lower your light to below my eyes. It is the first light I've ever seen. It has beauty but it is painful.'

" 'Sorry. We're interested in you—your planet. We have contact with other species. We—'

" 'I know, Captain. Let me quickly tell you our story. We are immortal. Yet we have births but maintain our population.'

" 'Mass deportations?'

" 'No. We are not a very old civilization. I, frankly, am not clear as to the nature or science of our full developmental story. We were primitives on a naked planet at about the same time your species lived in caves. And then one of us discovered. . . We had waters and naked rock, barren soil. Some visitor must have brought the fishes. We had fishes—we fished

them. One day while this ancestor was fishing, knowing that his tribe had hunger, he was thinking strongly of fish. Suddenly he saw a fish and by a curious process he became a duplicate of that animal. He flopped to the ground—another tribesman grabbed him and he was eaten. But one of the tribe who had witnessed the transfiguration decided to investigate.

" 'Apparently we had the capacity to adopt any form. However, the capacity was limited to one adoption. Some of us turned ourselves into rocks. When visitors came and taught us of trees and grass and animals on their planets, some of us turned ourselves into those things. But most of us simply lived and grew and learned. I forget, that was in the time of the Great Light. Suns or stars were filling our skies. In those days there was never darkness.

" 'Then it was simple. More and more advanced races came to visit. And suddenly our world exploded with new possibilities. They had radio, we—some of us—became transmitters and others receivers. They had images of their cities. Some of us were drawn by those images and turned ourselves into the buildings and streets—enough, Captain, so that we had cities. Perhaps you chose to be a great building forever—or if you thought ill of yourself, maybe you became a gutter. Think of it. Everything you see, you have seen, was once one of us.'

"'What happened then?' I asked this copy of myself.

" 'By copying we assimilated many elements of many civilizations. From primitivism we became advanced. It all happened quickly. Four thousand of you years ago we were peasants. Three thousand six hundred of your years ago we had become the most advanced civilization in the universe. We even visited your planet. Funny stories of that. One day I must tell you.'

"'Whatever you want to tell me,' I said.

" 'Perhaps I should tell first of a very handsome species of very distant visitors who came to us. They were having some difficulty with their population and they considered our planet suitable for their colonial needs. So they came in great numbers, bent on conquest. It was very impressive to us. Prior to this we had had no knowledge of war. Suddenly, Captain, almost all of us wanted to be warriors. We became them. We had no logistic problems as they did, but we had all their knowledge and skills and technology. We quickly defeated them in a bloody battle that only was too short—and with our warriors' hunger we felt compelled to go on.

We went off, Captain, to conquer the universe. We were mostly warriors, what else was there to do?'

" 'The universe is vast. Please lower that light, Captain. It pains my eyes—they are greatly atrophied after three thousand years of darkness. We conquered and conquered—planet after planet fell to us. We were mighty, powerful, ruthless. Too much so, it seems. The other planets, the ones we had not yet destroyed, for the first time came into a confederation for the specific purpose of acting against us. In one great sweep—while most of our warriors were off at wars—they came and burned out our stars and destroyed those of us who were weapons and eradicated every source of light. Remember, we can only copy. They destroyed all our sources of light and with no model we had no new capacity to make light, even to make fire. Their purpose was to kill us, of course. How could life exist without some of the products of light? But enough of us had not yet committed ourselves to a modification. We still had our adaptability. We became creatures of darkness—even those of us who chose to be plants—food—soon became indestructible plants—immortal. Don't ask me how. Immortality is basic to our species—it is the one thing we have. Our children have the capacity to change as I have changed to copy your image.'

" 'You'll always be my image?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'Can others become you, become my image?'

" 'Only from the original, Captain. There is infinite allowance of duplication from the original.'

" 'You are no longer a warrior race?'

" 'That is difficult to say. It is part of our genetic heritage. Given freedom to move and be and given sight—who knows what we might be again.'

" 'The light went out three thousand years ago?'

" 'That is correct, Captain.'

" 'And you've just maintained yourselves in this darkness in a relatively quiescent state?'

" 'We are noted for our perseverance. We always go on. The stores you have passed, the radio you have heard they go back to the days of light or the period before the lack of light forced modification. For three thousand six hundred years it has been as you see it. We have survived. We have waited.'

"WELL, Powers, that was it. We thanked him. He urged us not to rush off. We said that we had to, but we would report

and we certainly expected to send back a full Sci-Explor Team. He said that he and his people would look forward to that. And then we left."

"They have water there?" I asked the general.

"You are being obtuse. Perhaps it's the heat. Yes, of course they have water. But we never went back. No scientific team visited them. They are strictly a prohibited planet. They are rated a prime menace. They are just waiting to copy from anyone—to copy enough so that they can go out and conquer again."

"How can you know that, General?"

"Restricted File Nine-A-four."

"That's an ancient history file."

"Yes. These beings have the capacity to become invincible. For the sake of all *I* planets in these galaxies, for the sake of Earth, I am sorry—but I must forbid you to land."

"We need liquids or we will die, General."

"Eight hundred and twenty-seven on this ship—how many billions out there? I recommend, Captain, that you shut off oxygen. Death will be swift and painless. I further recommend that you aim your ship at the planet and time it for full fusion impact. These creatures are an abomination."

"My responsibility is to this ship and to my crew."

"Like hell it is, Captain. Your responsibility is considerably greater than that."

"Very well, General. Thank you for telling me this. I'll take it under advisement."

"I'll take command. You are relieved, Captain."

"No, General It's my ship. Consider yourself confined to quarters," I told him and stalked out.

NOTHING new to report as I resumed my command. Temperature was 135°F. Revised estimates indicated ship mortality would be 19% at 140°F. Ship proceding on course with minimal power utilization. Crew resting, in position. Command room filled with nudists. The very attractive flight officer Duncan wore only a cache sex. It was largely sweated through and transparent. Duncan was the one beauty on the ship. Every man had hoped from the outset to establish a relationship with her. She had proved stiff, devoid of humor, uninterested in sexual pursuits, painfully modest and totally untouchable. I watched a bead of perspiration roll down the valley between her high breasts. I found I had not enough juices to be aroused. No other crewman or of-

ficer on the deck seemed even aware of her nudity.

We just sat, too tired and enervated to speak. We waited. We watched the clock. We watched the thermometer slowly inch up. We listened to the brief reports of new compartments reaching Thermal Accelerate Lethal. And we wasted away. Our freeze-dried foods had no liquids in them, there was not even frost to lick. We had no liquids in us—not any more. We fasted. And every half-hour we got the time check, the ETA to our planet, to the general's planet: Rallfeld.

GETTING hard to breathe. The nasal passages burn, they feel all wrong, unnatural. We're three from Rallfeld—call it that. I announced it to the crew as if it meant something. The doctor says it just had to be something for them to hang on to. A number. Our voices croak when we speak. My throat feels as if it's going to hemorrhage. The worst thing is the building headache. No one is sweating any more. That's over. Four crewmen and the major are down. I've just left them. I don't have the strength to move them—I doubt that anyone else has. They're just down where they fell, a reproach to me, a reminder of our imminent fate to the others.

Temperature is now 142°. I'm trying to guess at what temperature our instruments will start going out, though I know that most of them will certainly outlast us. I keep wondering whether it isn't worth the risk to open primary or at least secondary approach procedures just to have some reference if the heat does knock essential equipment out of function. But if I use that power now, knowing that I'm obligated to use full power on real approach, how many more men will I kill?

God! It's a great ship, an extraordinarily fine entrustment of command. But with the trust I have responsibility.

What do I do?

Rallfeld has to be judged rational. He seemed rational when he told the story. I believed his experience. But belief isn't enough, not with command.

The override gauge, the supreme command center counter, even without power is reading Condition 9. That means they must have a satellite system and their transmitters must have max power.

9 means off limits. Going into the mushrooms of a nuclear war they only send out a 7. Nine means it. If I land and get away with it—if I save the ship and my crew—if I get back alive with no damage done they will still lock me up for life. The penalty is automatic. There are no exceptions.

But how could they know? If I pull it off, how would they know? If the planet is twice the size of our Earth with only a fraction of Earth's population certainly there has to be one place sparsely populated. It's dark perpetually. We could go in, get the water in fast and get the hell off. And then I could claim I didn't know anything, didn't know where the hell I was, was too irrational in a heat stroke to even be aware of 9.

Temperature is 145°. We're now 38% down—we've stopped counting cortex burnouts. It's bad. I don't understand how I'm still making it.

Eighty-two minutes from the planet. Difficult to swallow the stimulants—effects are erratic and lunatic.

As long as they are blind or almost blind, as long as all is darkness below—as long as they don't have light we have to be fairly safe. If we actually encountered them, how many would there be? We could go out fully armed, kill everything. The only real danger would be if they captured one of us. Say one sees us, or a dozen, or a hundred, or a thousand. As long as they can't hold us for endless replications, what can they do? They can't take reproductions from each other. With maximum urgency, with every facility at our command, we can get the water and get out. Even if they somehow took ten thousand of us—what would ten thousand mean against all the power of the Patrollers? No threat, no serious threat. Speed is the only issue, the single issue.

Seventy-five minutes. I'll turn on approach at fifteen, not before. And even that is premature and very late.

The doctor just fell. He was a good friend.

Do I explain again chain of command? No. They know. If I don't make it they'll handle it. They're a fine crew.

"We're at two hundred and five degrees Fahrenheit, Captain," the chief said.

I HAD to think before realizing he was talking about P 4. We had six degrees before we blew up. I made my mind stop thinking of what was happening in the reactor, how many millions of degrees were getting ready to burst out of it. Twenty-eight minutes. Question is whether to wait on approach power.

I tried to think. "We'll go into approach at four minutes. Power at four and a half. Can you handle it that quickly?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right. Now listen. We're going to have damn little chance to pick and choose our site. We want

water and we want to be as far from any habitation as possible. No contact. When we get in: full armed section, manual total annihilate. The men must keep together. Hoses and fast-as-possible loading."

"It'll take us time to cool."

"Okay. Then land, sit tight, buttoned up. We wait, then out and fast load."

"Life support?"

"Not necessary. There is oxygen compatible atmosphere." If we're battened down and just sit on the surface, even with time, what the hell can they do to us? They might duplicate our ship but what about our interior? What good would the ship be without our interior, without us, without our operating knowledge? No. They won't be able to touch us.

Temperature fierce. It's difficult to think, to move. Twelve minutes. Maybe I'll go down in history as the greatest traitor, but I'm not going to sit here and die. I'm not going to surrender my command to death.

I'm even thinking in a whisper.

"So you're going ahead, Captain," a strong, natural voice. I turned painfully, slowly. It was the general. He was fully uniformed. He wasn't sweating. He didn't look weakened. He stood there.

"I ordered you confined to your quarters, General."

"Poor Captain Powers. You have decided to go in, haven't you?"

"Yes, General. It's a risk that I must take."

"Very well. Just do not forget that I did my best to warn you. I tried to stop you."

"Yes. I understand. When we get back to Extender, I'll place myself under arrest, sir."

"Do you mind if I stay up and watch the landing? It's sort of coming home, you know?"

"Do what you please. Just don't interfere, sir."

"Tell me this, Captain. As I understand the new propulsion technology, a simple weld and a viscuous fluid would fix up your ship to perfection. Is that correct?"

"That's all, General. Just that."

"Good. I'll just get out of your way, unless you should want me to help."

"How is it you still have your voice, your strength?"

"Constitution, I suppose, Captain." He smiled.

Temperature up to 151°F. One-half minute to power.

In a great flash the screen lit. We had U-V on, dark probe. It is wrong! Lights. They have lights down there! Water. One, there. Another body of water. Yes. Looks sparsely populated. Good. No roads, nothing. Looks safe. Going for it.

Those are lights. Where did they get them? How?

Going in fast. Strong gravity pull. Three minutes. Nothing else left Abort attempt now would take us into fusion. Up to 208°F in P 4. Our temperature is 157°. Just coming in now. Nothing to it. Just steady in.

"Where the hell did they get those lights?"

"I LEFT a few things behind, Captain. The rover. I guess they must have replicated that like crazy. That laser spot, those headlights."

"Coming in, Captain. Thirty-five seconds."

We're going to make it.

"Down! Down! We're down!"

"Shut off—everything off!"

"Well, you made it, Captain. Congratulations."

"Yes. Why didn't you tell me that you'd left them light?"

"Call it dual loyalties. I'm taking over command of this ship, now, Captain."

"Why now?"

"We're here is why. You and your crew may consider yourselves prisoners of war. If I have any influence I'll try to persuade my people to treat you according to the Interplanetary Convention."

"You are—" I tried to get it out, couldn't. My tongue was swollen. "Sabotage?"

"The heat really slowed up your thinking, Captain. The story about the first visit to the planet is quite true. Just the one now obvious slight omission. Come with me, Captain. Here. I'll help you."

"No."

"Oh, yes. I tried to save you. I've admired your species. But I do have my loyalties, you know."

"No."

"Yes, Captain. You needn't be worried about your life, not for a good long time." He walked over to me and just lifted me in his arms. I wanted to fight but I was too feeble. He was an old man but he just picked me up and carried me. We went down ship, my ship. I desperately wanted to fight him, kill him, get to the controls. I had to get us to fusion. But I couldn't even lift my arms.

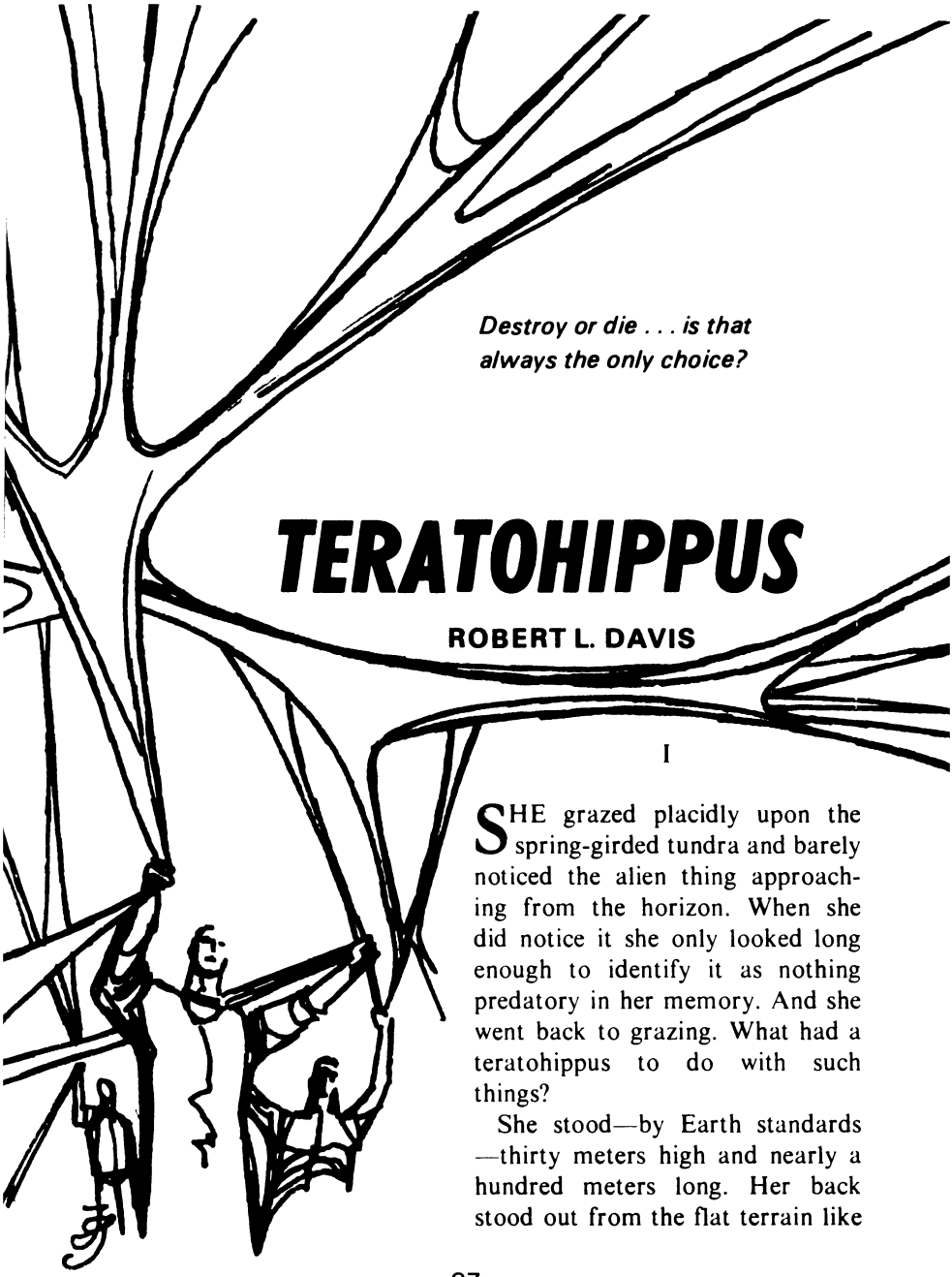
Crew fallen away, dead littering the passageways.

We reached the hatch.

I knew what awaited me even before it opened.

They were there in the light—thousands of them, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands. Silent, disciplined, menacing. They were all Rallfeld.

It's 316 days to Extender; 408 days to Forward Seven; 521 days to Pluto Area Base. In 763 days, I—a million times over—am coming home. ●



Destroy or die . . . is that always the only choice?

TERATOHIPPUS

ROBERT L. DAVIS

I

SHE grazed placidly upon the spring-girded tundra and barely noticed the alien thing approaching from the horizon. When she did notice it she only looked long enough to identify it as nothing predatory in her memory. And she went back to grazing. What had a teratohippus to do with such things?

She stood—by Earth standards—thirty meters high and nearly a hundred meters long. Her back stood out from the flat terrain like

a long low hill. The slope to her anterior portion was almost identical to that of her posterior—gradual and not at all precipitous. Her mouth, an efficient grazer's mouth, was hidden by the anterior part of her body and pointed straight down over the vegetation that formed her diet.

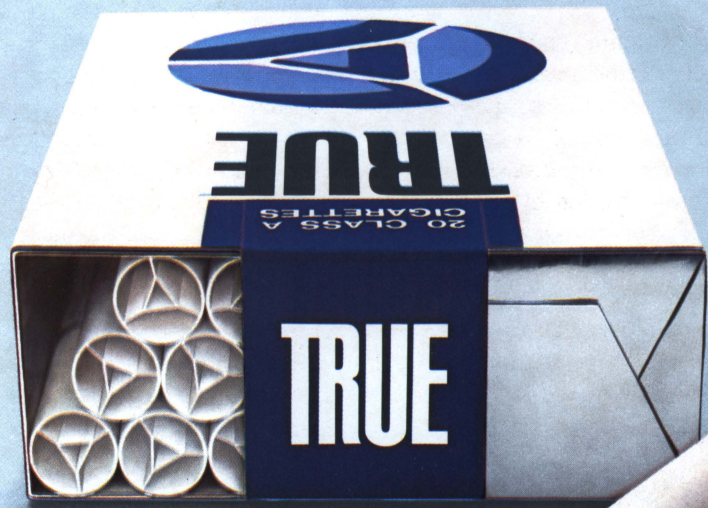
Armored over her entire length, she normally had nothing to fear at this latitude. Occasionally the vespertosauri would get this far, but they were a minor hazard at worst. No projection thrust itself from her profile—even her eyes were sunk beneath several layers of armor, massive eyelids that opened only when vibration gave a warning—for even to a teratohippus the powerful winds of the region were a danger.

She was well adapted to her environment. A masterpiece of Betulian evolution. As the official guidebook put it:

> *Teratohippus ectostia*—one of the wonders of Betul's fauna, this huge beast is a harmless grazer inhabiting the polar reaches of the planet and surviving on otherwise inedible plant life there. Little is known of its physiology or behavior because of the difficulties of conducting research in the barren reaches of its habitat. Although the creature is comparatively rare, you may be able to observe one grazing as you pass over the northern tundras on your way to the Ferris Observatory . . .

AS THE skimmer passed over perhaps the thousandth frozen rill—this one looking exactly like the others—Millie went back to her guidebook (itself not very thrilling) and wondered when the trip over the desolation would end. She had been told the journey to the Betulian pole would last "all day" and had been unable to imagine what the term could mean on a planet with a much longer day than Earth's—and on a course that followed the sun on its journey. It was still broad daylight. Eight hours had passed and the pilot—Captain Chamberlan—had just announced they were six hours away from Ferris.

Only five passengers were on board. The others were her Project Chief Dr. Jens Hiacint and the team's documentarian, Henry Dalmat, plus two astrohistorians from the Grand University of Tufts, Earth's leading institute for interplanetary archivalism. She had not caught the names of the last two (she thought one was named Smith) and they hadn't tried hard to get acquainted.



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Archivalists generally looked down on the sciences she and her two colleagues represented. Alien biology was still a fairly new field and only a few schools, such as their University of Wayland, dabbled in it. Earth was still hung up on history, she thought, because of its economic value in settling legal claims of possession. She supposed interplanetary law—with its attendant fields, archivalism and power theory—was important. (Earth was of value now only as a receptacle of documents and as an arbiter of dispute.) But she wished they would recognize the importance of other—less pragmatic—sciences as well.

None of the passengers were "tourists," of course, because no ordinary citizen could afford the immense costs of visiting another solar system and its developing planet. They were, like most visitors to Betul, Earthling scientists sponsored by wealthy universities on a mission intended to add to that vast repository of information that was the parent planet.

When Millie spotted the dark object on the horizon she immediately remembered the item in her guidebook. She turned back a few pages and read the meager information on teratohippus. She nudged Dr. Hiacint and pointed out the beast. He had been dozing but became instantly alert. Hiacint was a leading alien biologist, head of her department. He grabbed his binoculars and leaned against the porthole as he examined the strange beast.

"God, what I'd give to be able to look at it up close." His gray head was quivering with excitement.

"May I use your glasses a minute?" Millie was a teracist and this animal was a classic example in her specialty. He handed over the binoculars with overt reluctance. She looked closely at the mountainous creature and marveled at how it could get enough sustenance in these barren wastes.

Her excitement was perhaps greater than his. "I wonder if we could manage an opportunity to study it while we are here?" She looked questioningly at Hiacint.

Behind her she heard a snicker. One of the astrohistorians (the one named Smith?) had his head buried in a vital statistics record from Ferris—he was deliberately ignoring the beast on the tundra.

"You could never last out there, Miss Verd," he said. "I understand the temperature approaches absolute zero when darkness falls."

"And how do you know so much?"

He gestured at his book. "I've

been reading about attempts to reach and study that creature. Survival down there is almost impossible for humans. No one has ever lived through an attempt to travel the tundra on the surface. A team of three biologists died a few years ago near here while trying to observe a teratohippus or whatever you call them. It says here that—"

"Oh, be quiet," she snapped. "I don't have time to waste right now." She looked back at the animal, was alarmed to see that the skimmer was almost directly above it. She pressed her face against the port. "Does it seem to be moving?" she asked Dr. Hiacint.

"I can't see anything resembling movement. But we don't know yet what is under all that armor. It could be feeding—or doing any number of things down there."

"Professor, isn't there equipment for survival in that type of environment?"

"Of course there's equipment," the astrohistorian butted in. "But it has limitations, mainly on the length of time you can stay out there, but also on the size and sophistication required for your type of studies."

She told him petulantly, "I didn't ask you, Mr. Smith."

It was then that she felt the barely perceptible, but different, vibration in the skimmer. The others sensed it, too, to judge by their expressions. She looked out through the porthole and saw the surface approaching.

"My God. We're going down."

STEF CHAMBELAN, a captain in the Visitor's Transportation Section, had been cursing his boredom and wondering why he had volunteered for the job. The Exploratory Corps needed the money brought in by visitors, of course, and someone had to tend to them . . . but, he thought, *why me?* He always reached this stage about halfway across these barren deserts between Base and Ferris. The ship nearly flew itself and he could hardly keep from dozing. But he couldn't afford to give in. His passengers might be looking at him—their entire crew—and lose faith. But he was yawning when it happened.

The shudder was caused by a lack of power. He quickly switched off the reactor, which showed an unaccountable and dangerous temperature. Auxiliary power came on immediately and automatically, but the shuddering did not cease. He glanced at the gauge and realized there was simply not enough energy on board to keep the craft flying.

The ship gave a series of violent jerks. The engines deprived of

their customary load, were straining. He switched all he had into the landing mode and the skimmer calmed down a bit. He programed immediate touchdown procedures and punched the Mayday indicator.

Another serious shockwave shook the small ship and he switched off the signal. There was just enough energy now, to keep the ship in landing mode. It was settling slowly to the surface, shuddering slightly.

"Crash positions," he yelled to his passengers, afraid even to use the intercom. Over his shoulder he saw his charges folding their seats back to reclining position. Then the shudder became a gasp. He manually overrode the landing mode and speeded up the descent. At about fifteen meters the power went out completely.

The frozen, powdery, mold-like life on the tundra—the basic food of the teratohippus—saved their lives as the ship plummeted to the surface.

WHEN she felt the first shock —which felt something like a vespertosaur mounting its attacking dive—she started to close up all her defenses and prepare for an attack. But being the slow, deliberate creature she was, she elected to wait and analyze the vibrations a little longer.

They were coming from almost overhead and they seemed to her more like the strugglings of some small dying creature than the threatening dive of a predator.

She felt the shock of the craft crashing somewhere behind her and her multiple olfactors recognized the slight scent of a plentitude of food at the point of impact. The silence following the shock convinced her that no danger dwelt in the little creature that just died.

The rich odor of food was tempting, but she could not afford to turn about for it. Ahead, many days ahead, was her nest with her young—now in hibernation—who would require her milk soon. She was two-thirds of the way through her circle. She could not stop now.

Her brain blotted out the memory of the strange dying creature that flew and programed itself for the critical days ahead when time—she thought—would be her greatest enemy.

WHEN Chambelan came to (he must have been unconscious only a minute or two) he was amazed they were all still alive. The skimmer had not been designed to take that hard a fall and —with total loss of power—the life-support systems should have failed, too.

He checked over the systems

before he even checked on the passengers. Life support was functioning—partially—on stored power sources that were independent of all other systems. They had perhaps eight hours to go. Communications systems were dead, destroyed on impact. All locomotive systems were out. What he had left were a few scanning systems. It didn't look good.

He made his way back through the debris to check on the passengers.

"Everyone okay?"

"Yes, I think so." The speaker was Hiacint, who had pretty well taken over direction of the party. "What I don't understand is—with the damage to all the equipment—why weren't we all injured?"

"That's easy to explain, sir," Chambelan said after a minute's thought. "Those cabin seats were salvaged from the interplanetary ship that brought our first team to Betul. They were designed to protect passengers from much greater impacts than this. What really surprises me is why the shell to this skimmer didn't fracture. With no breathable oxygen and as flimsily dressed as we are, we could have had no injuries and could still have died in seconds."

Dr. Hiacint had a small instrument in his hands. "While you were busy up front I was examining the powdery substance that we landed in. We seem to have hit a colony of a supercold one-celled life. It seems to have a depth of several meters. The ship's fall was broken by the colony's bulk. Now we have 'floated' to the top of the mass—probably a group rejection of an alien substance."

"What is that gadget?"

"It's a bioscanner. I took my reading through the porthole and analyzed it with my portable Prolyzer. The colony seems to be moldlike—"

"Mold?"

"Yes, you might say a giant supercold mushroom saved our lives."

"That's all very interesting, but when are we going to be rescued?" The speaker was Michael Peripet, leader of the Initial Archivalist Documentation Team.

Chambelan took a deep breath. "I don't really know if we are going to be rescued. I was only able to broadcast Mayday for a few seconds. I had a choice of broadcasting or crashing. I chose to land safely. It is doubtful that anyone heard our Mayday."

"Why aren't you sending out a message now?"

"Because our communications are shot. Besides, we don't have the power even if we could repair the equipment."

"We have power to keep this ship warm. Why don't we have enough to send out a message?"

"You don't seem to appreciate the tremendous energy required for communication on a planet this size. We are somewhere in the middle of a vast area that comprises one-third of Betul. Betul is about three-fifths the size of the planet Jupiter. Line-of-sight communications—the most economical—are impossible. Our only means of reaching either Base or Ferris Observatory is by planetary modulation and this requires a great deal more than we have available."

"Surely they'll miss our flight and come looking for us," Dr. Verd asked, "won't they?"

"I'm sure they will. But by the time we're missed at Ferris—about six hours from now—our present power supplies will be almost exhausted. As I said earlier, we won't last more than a few seconds once our life-support system fails."

Peripet was looking through the porthole at the bleak tundra of Betul. "What a place to die."

Chambelan felt a little embarrassed. He was responsible for the safety of these people, but there really wasn't anything he could do. "I think I'll go up front and see if I can salvage some communications gear. It's our only hope. Maybe a scout ship will be in the area for normal, line-of-sight communications." As he turned to leave he knew there was no hope of the last. Scout ships seldom came to this area. All personnel were busy building the new closed city at Estrodome, on the far side of Betul. But he had to keep up a good front.

The rest stared with Peripet through the ports at the forbidding spot that would probably become their tomb.

II

THE captain had been busy for more than a hour in the cabin up front. He didn't seem to be having much luck. The archivalists had withdrawn into themselves and were still staring out. Good old Dalmat was busy recording everything—particularly the evidence on the mold culture that had broken their fall—for future generations. Dr. Hiacint was running more tests and feeding them to Dalmat. They were both good scientists—Millie thought it a shame to see them die like this.

She was still thinking about the teratohippus, about survival, about things that were and ought to be.

"Professor," she said finally, "I've been wondering about something. Our biggest problem now is centered around the need for heat."

"Yes, I've had that on my mind, too. We seem to have food supplies and oxygen for several days, but a source of energy great enough to protect us from the intense cold here is our greatest need."

"Is there any way of searching this area for a source of heat? I was thinking of the teratohippus. If it survives and is able to move that huge bulk—musn't it generate large amounts of heat?"

"It should." Professor Hiacint was thinking. He turned toward the cabin where the captain was working. "Chambelan," he called, "do you have a functioning infrared scanner?"

"Yes, among other scanning equipment. But I have no equipment for analysis."

"We can use my Prolyzer, which is still operative. Let's scan the area for heat sources."

"What good will that do us?"

"Perhaps none. But what harm will it do?"

Millie had the Prolyzer in hand and was moving toward the cabin. Hiacint gathered up some materials and followed her. He connected his data-plotter onto the ship's infrared scanner and Chambelan started a sweep.

His first effort revealed no heat sources at all, nothing within sight even near survival levels for human beings.

"Tighten the scanning," Millie told them. "Bring it in on the Teratohippus itself. If there's any heat source out there capable of being of value to us it must be in a creature the size of that thing."

Chambelan tuned the instrument to tight scan and manually aimed the fountenna at the creature, while both Millie and Hiacint leaned over the Prolyzer—which Hiacint had programed for direct image response on the screen.

At first nothing appeared. The professor punched in a more sensitive response and slowly an image came on the screen—a bluish tinge showed on a field of gray. "The heat level on the creature's dermis is far below survival level for us, about forty degrees below freezing." A frown and a shrug showed Hiacint's disappointment.

"Wait, Professor!" Millie was looking closely at the screen, where a tiny green speck appeared. "Look there." Then: "Captain, would you try to take the scan in even closer—onto that spot?"

Chambelan tightened the scan even more and guided the external fountenna as best as he could. As he gingerly inched the level forward the green dot became a large area of brilliant green in a yellow field.

Hiacint punched madly onto the control board. "Millie, you've

found it. There seems to be an aperture in this creature with temperatures suitable for the support of human life. The aperture itself is barely large enough for a human, but—"

"But it could lead to something larger." Millie was earnest.

"But why do you think so? asked Chambelan.

"Ah, that's Miss Verd's specialty," Hiacint replied. "She pioneered the field of teracial biology by finding similar types of creature on other planets. She can probably explain better than I." They both turned to Millie.

"This life-form undoubtedly belongs to the class known as Teraciae. They are all large animals, exoskeletal and usually warm-blooded, which have adapted to extremely cold environments on once-warm worlds. The external skeleton is a primary evolutionary tool for their survival and generally includes a cavity of varying size for the purpose of air intake—a breathing chamber, as it were."

"But why a cavity?"

"Because the creature's breathing apparatus is still attuned to its warmer existence. The cavity allows the external air to be warmed up before it enters the animal's lungs. I was only guessing, but I supposed this creature to be like others I've studied."

Professor Hiacint turned to Chambelan. "Do we have any means of leaving this ship?"

"Yes, there are suits aboard for limited use outside. They contain enough fuel to provide warmth for about an hour—but certainly not enough for a trip to the creature and back."

"But enough," Millie asked, "to reach the teratohippus?"

"I think so."

"Then one of us must go out and see if we can use it for survival."

Chambelan got up. "I guess I'd better go. There's a good chance that whoever goes won't come back."

"But you wouldn't know what to look for." Millie turned to the professor. "Would he?" Hiacint started to open his mouth, but Millie cut him off. "So you see, Captain, I really must be the one to go."

"But you're the only wo—" Hiacint's warning glance directed Chambelan's attention to the growing choler on Millie's face. He felt a little foolish, but he nodded reluctantly. "Yes."

"YOU know, my name really isn't Smith."

Millie stopped putting on her EV suit and looked up in surprise.

"Did I ever say it was?"

"Yes, just before the accident or

whatever it was. I believe I was teasing you a bit and—"

"Teasing? You were being downright nasty."

"I suppose I was. I'd like to apologize."

She finished inserting herself into the rather flimsy suit and was testing the bulky heating unit she would wear on her back. "That's all right. I'd really forgotten about it." He seemed a little embarrassed. "By the way, what is your name?"

"It's Smirg, Evan Smirg. I'm the vivistorian with the team."

She looked a little puzzled. The word was new to her. You never knew what gimmick the archivalists would come up with in order to grab more responsibility in interspace affairs. She started to set on her helmet when he caught her hand.

"Wait. What I really want to say is that I think I should take your place and go out there."

She lowered the helmet. "Why?"

"Well—first, I'm probably the least capable of aiding the group in a survival situation. And second, I don't think a woman should take such a risk. I think—"

When the rest of the group got there, Smirg was nursing a sore eye, trying to stop the flow of blood from his nose and choking back a chuckle. Millie had closed the airlock's inner door and was grinning triumphantly through the viewport.

In another instant she was outside, alone in the forbidding atmosphere of Betul.

IN THE Betulian biosystem the teratohippus is of only minor importance, but it does contribute. It is one (certainly the largest) of a number of grazers descended from sea dwellers of eons ago when Betul was a planet of tropical waters.

The lowest order of life in these reaches is the moldlike mycoplankton. This is composed of unicellular life, most of it capable of converting the frozen water and carbon dioxide and suspended minerals into proteoids. Other members of the plankton live off the majority and are called simply proteophages.

As the mycoplankton migrate through and over the glacistrata in search of minerals they provide food for the grazers. The grazers in turn are food for the teeming populations of the moderate zones, which invade the tundras during the brief "summer" period.

The circle is completed when the wastes and decaying bodies of the teratohippus, and of the hunters who die during summer forages, supply a continuous source of minerals for the mycoplankton.

The teratohippus thus is only one link in the vast food chain of

the northern tundras which is so important in maintaining the seemingly overpopulated animal and plant existence of the Betulian equatorial regions. Or rather, a portion of a link—expendable from a purely systems viewpoint.

"PROFESSOR HIACINT, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Dr. Verd. Your transmission is coming in clearly. Where are you now?"

"I'm in the cavity. It's extraordinarily large. Larger than any such we've seen before. Big enough to shelter all of us."

Millie rubbed her right hand as she looked around. Her knuckles were slightly tender from hitting the impertinent Dr. Smirg. *Maybe I shouldn't have,* she thought, *but he deserved it.*

The chamber was arched, about forty meters high in the center. It widened abruptly as one came in through the tiny aperture and extended about twelve or thirteen meters along the creature's dorsum until it narrowed again into a series of pulsating holds that she took to be air-intake pipes—nostrils.

The material of the walls and bottom seemed to be similar to the skeletal armor outside. It was hard and only porous enough for heat transfer. Where the sides sloped down and met the "floor" lay a strange phenomenon, something she had not seen in any other teraciae. The hard skeletal material gave way almost at the corner and became gray, fleshy. With her light she was able to make out several pools of liquid there. She decided not to explore further until she received assistance.

The radio interrupted her observations. "Dr. Verd, would you give us an atmosphere reading, please?"

"Certainly, I'm sorry." She plugged the small scanning device into her transmitter, pressed the switch. "I'm scanning now. What's the good word?"

Dr. Haicint's voice came through the speaker: "Temperature reading—eighteen degrees."

She heard a voice in the background pipe in: "eighteen, that's almost room temperature—"

"Atmosphere, nontoxic," Dr. Hiacint continued. "Oxygen reading is too low to maintain life but high enough so our nasalators will be sufficient. Dr. Verd, you may disconnect your climatization unit but continue using oxygen until we get there with a supply of nasalators."

"Fine. Will we have enough oxygen supplies?"

"At those levels we could last several months. Food could get to

be a problem. We'll abandon the ship now and join you. We'll take along all the oxygen and food supplies we have. How difficult is entry?"

"It's an easy slope, no worse than some of the hills out on the tundra. The creature is moving away from the ship, but very slowly."

"Fine, we'll join you there shortly."

FOR just a moment she had the peculiar sensation that her young were inside her again, but the great squirming and moving around were missing and none of her milk had been touched. The single sensation was there, but it was not substantiated by other sensations, so it must have been in error.

This was not a usual occurrence for a teratohippus, but her survival will was strong. She decided to move more rapidly. The strange sensation made her think of the young ones waiting for her back in the nest. They would need the milk she had been manufacturing throughout her circular eating journey.

She must reach them before they came out. Or they would die.

Her head turned a little more toward the nest and her motile muscles speeded up their cycle of contractions.

She was going home.

MILLIE felt rather than saw or heard the movement above. She flashed her light upon the forward wall (opposite the cavity entrance) and saw high above a row of throbbing tendons —wirelike strands—lying close to the wall and interwoven upon themselves. There were far too many to count. They stretched about two meters from a point at the highest peak of the ceiling to a long, narrow opening just above the creature's nostrils. The throbbing seemed to be irregularly paced. When her light flashed across the weird assembly of strands, those on the right side seemed to be throbbing wildly.

She started to step closer to explore the phenomenon, then thought better of it. Perhaps she should wait until the Dr. Hiacint arrived. The function of the tendons made three mysteries about this beast. She had some ideas, but they seemed farfetched. Dr. Hiacint would corroborate her theories or clear up the uncertainties.

She went through the problems again in her mind. Why was this chamber so much larger than other similar ones she knew of?

What was the purpose of the pools of fluid on the edge of the chamber? And what were those piano wires against the anterior wall?

She unstrapped the heating unit from her back, placed it on the floor and sat down upon it. She had a while to wait.

III

WHEN the five men arrived they were heavily loaded with equipment. They had enough oxygen for several months, thanks to the nasalators—the type that strapped around the neck. The flattened tube that curved across the cheekbone and fed oxygen into the left nostril would be uncomfortable but necessary.

Emergency rations they had for quite a few days, but the only communications equipment consisted of small transceivers in the EV suits, plus one small transmitter Stef Chambelan had salvaged from the ship. He hoped to make use of the unused power cells in the EV suits to get it operating at least on a line-of-sight basis.

Dr. Hiacint had his Prolyzer, of course, and Dr. Dalmat had scrounged up every scanning device he could find and carry. Dalmat's concern was less for survival than for the gathering of knowledge. As a documentarian, he lived in a world of data. Immortality lay for him within a vast and well-arranged array of facts that would be used and appreciated by future scientists. Compared with that, what had mere life to offer?

The archivalists were quite meek by now. The shock of approaching death had knocked all the pomposity out of them. Their work rewarded them well—but only during their lifetimes. They were frightened and carried their share of supplies from the ship. They also carried an unbelievable number of legal documents related to Betul. If they had any real dedication it was to the furtherance of Earth's supremacy in interspace law—documents were proof and proof was essential to law.

Chambelan mounted a simple video-scanner on the surface armor of the teratohippus, then settled down to his transmitter.

The three astrobiologists began a systematic exploration of their new home.

"WELL, Professor, what do you think of it?" Millie was seated with the rest as they ate their first day's rations. It had been a hard day and much was still unanswered. While the biologists had been examining the cavity little had been spoken.

Hiacint thought a moment before he answered. "I'm sure my conclusions will be the same as yours, Dr. Verd. I would say that the size of the cavity and the pools of fluid are related to each other. But the 'piano wires' as you call them are another thing entirely. Don't you agree?"

"Yes," Millie answered. "I think I know what the first two mean, but the third has me stumped."

"All right, you tell me what the first two are and I'll tell you what the third is."

"You know?"

"I think I know. But first things first."

Millie put the words together in her mind before she uttered them, then spoke carefully. "I'd say that the large size of the cavity means that it is used for some other purpose besides breathing—though it certainly serves as a breathing chamber, too. The pools of fluid provide a clue to that purpose. They seem to me to have only one possible use—to feed the young of the creature."

Smirg cut in: "You mean that stuff is milk?"

"Yes, milk." Millie grinned. "Just as in terrestrial mammals, except there are no mammae. I would guess that the fluid is created and stored here during a feeding cycle and the young feed on it during a nursing cycle that comes next."

"This place we're in is a kind of womb?" Smirg again. He was looking around in awe.

"Yes, a womb or a nursing chamber. She probably carries the young here during the next cycle, as I said, while she feeds. That would explain the extraordinarily high temperature. This cavity would also serve as protection for the young—both from predators and from the cold. They probably stay in here until they develop considerable size and are equipped with armor sufficient for life outside."

Smirg was looking at the tiny aperture. "If they get very large how in the world to they get out through that opening?"

Hiacint said, "There are two possible answers. First, the opening—just like the human vagina—might expand enough to let the young escape. The second, and I think the more plausible, answer is that the opening doesn't expand, but that the parent teratohippus is gradually consumed in the process of nursing and the young merely break their way out of the parent's carcass when the process is completed. Wouldn't you agree, Dr. Verd?"

"Yes," Millie answered. "I

hadn't thought about it, but I believe you must be right. She probably is destroyed in the process of 'giving birth.'"

Smirg looked a little upset at the thought. "But what about the male, does he keep on living while the female dies?"

Both Millie and the professor were smiling. "I don't think we'll find that there is a male," Hiacint said.

"But you call this creature 'she.'"

"Merely a euphemism, a term we've carried over from our terrestrial experience. I believe these creatures are asexual. The young are exact copies of the parents. But the functions we are describing here more closely resembles that of the Earth female than of the male, so I think we're justified in referring to the animal as a female."

Millie was thinking. "Professor, how many young do you estimate there are?"

"Judging by the number of pools, I'd say no more than four. There could be only one, of course, but I doubt it. The species would not last long on a one-to-one natal basis with the parent dying at childbirth."

"But what about the third phenomenon, the 'piano wires'? You said you had the solution to that."

"I believe I do." Dr. Hiacint said. "This creature is exoskeletal. If it originally were a water creature, as I think it was, it probably had an endoskeletal structure to begin with. I'm guessing that with the genetic change—due not only to exigency but to massive gamma radiation from the dying star (this planet's sun) that caused the change in the planet—the central motor elements of the creature were trapped in a middle position. Because they controlled movement they could not exist completely externally, but with the eons-long shift to an external skeleton they could not remain within the animal. I believe those wires up there are the mechanical motor control elements of teratohippus. They link the brain with the muscular structure."

"This means," Dalmat said, "that the teratohippus can be controlled by any person who could discover the meaning and function of each of those strands."

"Like a puppet, you mean?" asked Smirg.

"Not like a puppet—but as animate beings are controlled—"

"That program you were working on, Dalmat, did you complete it?" Hiacint and Dalmat had worked together for many years and they almost read each other's minds.

"Yes. Using the information Dr.

Verd gave us on the movement of the tendons when the teratohippus changed directions—and feeding in all the available data on the anatomy of the animal—I have been able to identify at least those strands that control direction. We should now be able to divert the animal from its present course and direct it toward the temperate zone." Silence fell—the silence of immense relief—as Dalmat continued: "From my calculations—based on Dr. Hiacint's data, of course—I estimate it will take about two and a half Earth months to reach a sufficiently southern position for a Mayday message to get through to Betulbase with line-of-sight broadcast."

Chambelan broke in. "But what about food? I don't think our present supply will last even with the strictest rationing."

"We should be able to use the teratohippus not only for transportation but also for sustenance," Hiacint said. "We'll be able to supplement our present rations with the 'milk' of the creature. My tests show it to be nontoxic. It probably won't taste very good, but I think it will keep us alive."

"But will the food be digestible? After all, we're dealing with an alien biological system."

"True, the substance contains proteoids not normally used by humans, but Dr. Verd and I have had a great deal of experience with this type of thing. I think we should be able shortly to produce enough artificial enzymes to allow us all to get the food we need. Here again the taste of the enzymes may not be the best, but survival itself is at stake."

No one spoke for a while. The very concept was strange. To ride a living mountain to safety. To use the feeble strength of one human hand to turn and direct a creature as long as a football field.

Finally Dalmat stood up. He took a sketch he had drawn and some wire and walked to the front of the creature. The others followed self-consciously, Hiacint holding a light for Dalmat. Using Chambelan's shoulders, Dalmat clambered to a point where he could reach the left side of the field of strands.

"These motor control elements seem to be reversed. The left group controls the right side of the animal and vice versa." He picked out a group of about ten or twelve and tied the wire around them. Drawing it tight, he threw the end to Hiacint, who anchored it firmly to the "floor" with a small spike.

"This should make the animal begin a slow turn to the right, back toward the south. In a few days we'll alter the wire to straighten

out her course. Then we'll be headed to safety. With our data plotter we'll be able to keep a running record of general position and make changes as they are needed." He brushed off his hands and looked at his work. "Not a bad job for a documentarian."

SHE felt her muscles tense involuntarily and then she realized she was moving toward the right. This could not be. She was moving away from her young. She could not do that. She must turn back. She flexed her muscles as best as she could, but she continued to move to the right.

Her young. What would happen to her young? But then the sensation that her young were already within her womb was stronger now. Could it be?

But no—she still should not be moving toward the right. She had turned right on her first two cycles, as was proper. For this and for the nursing cycles, she must move to the left. Something was wrong, but there was nothing she could do about it.

She continued grazing—as she must. She continued trying to turn to the left, as she must. She continued her steady pace, as she must. But the parental instinct cried within her with all the anguish of a species' need.

IT WAS many days later. The humans sat in the middle of the chamber, weary and impatient. Chambelan was twisting the dials on his transmitter, making another futile effort to reach someone with a Mayday. Smirg poured a vial of black liquid over a bowl of grayish paste and ate it with a spoon. It was peculiarly sweet—something, he thought, like a rotten mango.

It was night and the creature—as was its wont—had stopped its feeding until daybreak. The temperature outside was infinitely colder than anything on Earth but the inside temperature had dropped imperceptibly.

Millie sat with her back turned to the rest, looking at the gasping nostrils lit up by the shadowy light of the group's single functioning lattern. Finally she could stand it no more.

"Don't you feel the weeping?" she asked.

"Weeping?" It was Parapet. "What weeping?"

"The subtle shudder that she makes these days, a shudder that wasn't there when we first found her. I think she's weeping for her children that will probably die."

Parapet turned to Dr. Hiacint. "I think she's cracking under the strain. Don't you have any medicine to give her?"

The professor's glance at Parapet showed pure contempt. "She's not cracking up. She's right, you know. My instruments show a definite change in the teratohippus. 'Weeping' may not be the right word, but it's pretty close. We have warped this creature's existence, slain her children and now, perhaps, we are leading her to a certain death."

"But is it right, Professor?" Millie was on her feet. "Is it right for us to do this terrible thing? We are destroying not only a generation of these beings, we are leading this one—the creature that has been our salvation—into an environment that must kill her, to predators that will rip her to shreds, to a place where there will be no more food for her to eat. How can we justify our own existence with that crime over our heads?"

"Survival." Parapet's face writhed with emotion. "Survival—in this situation, we are the conquerors. For all time, on every planet and between planets, the conquerors—the strongest, the most intelligent, the craftiest—were the survivors and the weak paid with their own destruction. Whether it be tribe or species or man-to-man, it is right and just for the strong to destroy."

"My God, man, your vicarious experience of interplanetary power has made you absolutely insane." The speaker was Smirg. His attack on a fellow archivalist brought astonishment to every face. "The strong have not always destroyed the weak—not when strength was coupled with intelligence, for strength can by augmented by the aid of the weak. The butchers of all time—the Huns of our Earth and the Achobests of space, for example—have conquered only to a point and then in turn been destroyed by the civilizations that utilized all elements, strong and weak, to form strength by unity. What Miss Verd is trying to ask is: is there another way? Can we save both ourselves and this creature?"

Millie turned to face the professor. "Isn't there a way?"

He shook his head. "Both Dalmat and I have tried to find a solution. We've worked out model after model. But every way we look at it, either we must die or the teratohippus and its brood must die. There is no way to save all."

She turned her face again to the semidarkness. She spoke softly and as if by rote, as if she had rehearsed each word: "Then we must go on for another month, feeling the intense sorrow of a parent for its children? We must sit here and do nothing while this great creature slowly dies? We must try to wipe out from our minds and our con-

sciences the thought of the teratohippids out there somewhere dying?"

"I guess we must."

Smirg walked over and took her hand.

She did not object. And the shuddering seemed to each of them to become more intense.

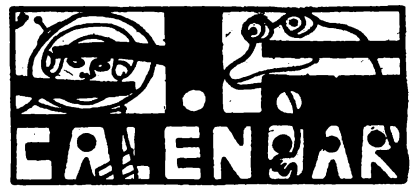
SOMEWHERE in the vast reaches of the tundra, within a neat cavern dug into the side of a frozen rill, lay three neat round shells. Giant cocoons in which young life was stiring.

The time had come. Genetics willed that they must come out, to creep into the warm womb of their parent. The shells shook with the struggle to escape.

A crack in each in turn let in the frozen atmosphere and movement stopped. The mouth of the cavern, normally covered by the warm body of the parent teratohippus, was open to the chill world.

There were no further struggles and no cries. The strong had won. The weak were dead.

Somewhere far away a weeping mountain knew the time had come and passed. And continued its involuntary way toward the land where vespertosauri and sciuropteroids would soon feast on its remains. ●



November 17-19, 1972. PHILCON. At Sheraton Hotel, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Principal Speaker: John Brunner. For information: Sanford Meschkow, 4413 Larchwood Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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SHAUSTA

DAVID LEWIS

The alien gave him a game to play—and one chance to win!

THE Terrans have poker and horses and wheels. The Kalidar have shausta. That would be fine, except that on Kalidar home territory you only play shausta, period. Poker? With the Kalidar? You might as well spit on their flag. So there's half of the basics of interplanetary gambling. The other half comes later.

Now, I take my living from *Sanka Maru*, a Japanese ship on the Kalidar run, but times have changed and a merchant doesn't sign on cutthroats any more. I'm a junior navigator and have been for five years. Promotion is slow on an Asian ship, especially for Caucasians. It's one of those things you learn to put up with and cheerfully, too, all things considered.

The pay level's good—I might get promoted—and twice a year I see the Kalidar. Forget about shausta, and the Kals are great people to know.

Their physical appearance helps, of course. Any one of them could visit Earth and pass himself off as a Terran if he really wished to. There are enough odd Terrans around to make almost any Kal look nearly normal. As a people they average a half-head shorter than the average human, have higher, flatter cheekbones and beakish noses. As I recall, there was some chortling about their low foreheads when pictures first reached our enlightened world, but something the pictures didn't show was how far back the Kalidar skull goes. I don't enjoy deflating egos, but their actual cranial cavity is somewhere around a quarter again larger than ours. That's something worth our thinking about.

What really wins us to the Kals, though, is pity. Imagine how you would take to being packed into some glorified refrigerator on board an unproven settlement ship and having yourself fired at some obscure dot on the edge of the intergalactic abyss. Furthermore, picture yourself arriving at your new Eden after a hundred years or so, only to find it aswarm with ratty humanoids busy calling themselves the only intelligent race in the universe. Yes, pity. The Kalidar situation is pathetic, and humanity goes wild over things like that. That's why we're so wonderful and that's why we let them have Mars.

So there are two big pluses for the Kalidar—they look like us and are pitiful. Other than that, one can put away a sizable fortune selling Kalidar merchandise back home, which helps us like each other economywise, too. That leaves only one more good reason for interracial amity between us and the Kals—or it seems good to me. The Kalidar aren't perfect.

I know that doesn't sound like much, but after years of comic-book indoctrination, humanity had been expecting first contact with some wildly superior beings who would make us feel that the plug had been pulled on our happy little world.

It didn't work out that way.

THERE are enough things morally, socially and technologically wrong with the Kalidar to leave us feeling smugly superior as long as we ignore things morally, socially and technologically wrong with humanity. For instance, the Kals have narcotics, violence and thieves. Beyond that, they have been known to cheat in business deals and, most importantly for me, they have a penchant for games of chance. Now what could be much more human than that?

So you see, I'm back to shausta already.

Shausta is the Kalidar game of chance. It is largely mathematical. It is easy to learn, harder to play, easiest to lose at. It is also well worth one's trying and it deserves some explanation, seeing that I'm writing about it.

For the best that I can offer we have to go back some five years. That was when I was on my first run, had laid foot on Martian soil for the first time ever and was as green a novice as *Sanka Maru* had ever seen. I was also as green a novice as Nathaniel Sanderson, Caucasian and mere cargo lugger for fifteen years, had ever seen or wished to.

Sanderson was a veteran of the Kalidar run. He had signed on the first ship out and as a result of his lengthy experience he knew as much about the Kalidar as any man alive when he retired. And before that golden day arrived he passed on to me much of what he had learned. He started the night we grounded—with shausta.

"You might as well start learning the ropes now," he said. "It'll take a long time."

"Sure," I answered. "Whatever you say."

We had become friends on the journey out on a basis of one-sided respect.

"We'll start with shausta," he said. "It'll do you the most good in the least time and it isn't hard. If you're the average crewman and want some port life once you've grounded you play shausta until you've made some friends among the Kals. Furthermore, if you're an offworlder and want to make some friends shausta's the only way to fly. Got that?"

"Yes," I said, wondering what this thing was.

"Shausta is Kalidar poker,"

continued Sanderson, answering my question by chance. "It's different, of course, but it's a game of chance—like rolling dice.

"The only thing is that shausta's mathematical. Here's the setup.

"To start with you've got the First Caller. When a round opens this character spouts a number—let's say ten. Then his assistant, the Action Determiner, pulls an action card from a pile on the floor in front of him. In shausta you sit on the floor, see? Now, the action card has a mathematical process on it—addition, subtraction, etcetera, on up to cubing. And here's the gamble part of it. You, the player, don't get to see the action card. That's a privilege reserved for the Determiner.

"Okay. Once you've got your first number and a card has been pulled, the Second Caller gives you another number. It can be anything as long as it's rational. The First Caller can give you an irrational if he feels like it. You following me?"

"Good. Now here's the game. You make a stab at what action was pulled for you and work it out in your head. The First Caller gave you ten. The Second Caller gives you thirteen. What do you say?"

I thought for a moment.

"Twenty-three," I said.

"You lose." Sanderson grinned. "Your action card was multiplication. What's more, even if you get the right action but don't come up with the exact answer of, say, the square root of thirteen divided by nine-eighteenths, you lose. That means your figuring had better be on the beam—you've only got two minutes. Overstep the time limit and you lose. In the beginning the numbers are simple—you don't hit irrationals and stuff until the stakes start getting high. Stakes always start out low and it's in incredibly bad taste to wager more than a hundred. If by some chance your action card is squaring or cubing the Action Determiner holds up a clenched fist. That's to tell the Second Caller not to give you another number and you square or cube the one you already have. That's the game—except for one more official, usually a computer that works out the problem you've been given. His—its—word is law. If your answers don't match you lose. Simple as that. All you need to do is keep your head and think clearly. It's errors in figuring that usually show who comes out on top. The drawing business is all chance and players average about the same number of right or wrong guesses, usually wrong.

"You ready to play?"

"No," I said, too quickly.

"Didn't think so," he agreed. "But come along and watch.

Maybe you'll think differently by the time we leave."

"Maybe," I echoed.

So we went.

I QUICKLY discovered two things about shausta and the Kalidar that Sanderson had neglected to tell me. For one, shausta could not have been a worse game for the Kalidar to play.

Can you imagine any Earthside gambler with enough faith in his own intelligence to add figuring out equations in two minutes flat to the already risky element of chance in a game? I can't—and that's why I was worried about shausta. I felt that any race crazy enough to invent such a gamble must be a race of mathematical wizards. And I couldn't have been more wrong. The Kalidar I met that night were more like mathematical slugs, so much so that by the time we left I was sure an unhampered Terran could run rings around most any one of them. But I suppose you caught that modifier—"unhampered."

The Kalidar played dirty.

The Kalidar played background music.

Such background music you have never heard. Maybe you think that some oriental tunes sound alien to the Caucasian ear and vice versa. I do and I have evidence from the other side. It's taken me five years to get used to what *Sanka Maru's* captain pipes over the intercoms at night—for me it's one of those things that you learn to live with, like slow promotions. But the stuff that the Kalidar play is alien to where you can feel it like a brick.

Considering the importance of the *tachika* style to interplanetary gambling, I'll go into some detail. First of all, the music is always played in shausta houses and it's always played live by a husband-and-wife team. These two characters are extraordinary in themselves, fanatically devoted to their music and generally semistarved. They double on the instruments—two large recorders, one small one and a snaredrum-proportioned percussion piece—but at least one of the the big recorders is always in use, giving what is best described as the melody line.

The music starts. Every piece opens the same way, with the man taking a shuddering breath and blowing the lowest possible note for the longest possible time. Then, eyes bulging, he nips a quick breath and shoots chromatically up and down his range in maybe ten seconds, which isn't to say that his range is short but that he's playing somewhat faster than sixty-fourth notes. Then you know the concert has begun. The man gives another

long low note, this one accompanied by wife on percussion—and next the world between your ears erupts in a burst of what I understand is sheer improvisation along standard themes that will last anywhere from a quarter to a half-hour, whereupon both musicians collapse, clawing for air and water, only to start up again immediately after.

If you were a lover of music I suppose you could learn to love this. I don't mind it myself as long as I'm not doing anything, since strange as it seems, *tachika* is a superb tranquilizer. The only problem is, they always play it during rounds of shausta and if you're doing the gaming you'll soon find that you can't think clearly, that numbers get lost somewhere below your cranium and over your eyes and that you lose whatever bet you made.

That's what I mean by the Kalidar's playing dirty. *Tachika* brings you down to the same mathematical plane they inhabit and maybe below it. When Sanderson and I left the action that night I was positive I could play the game, but I was equally sure that *tachika* would give me hell when I tried.

Of course, there's more to this *tachika* than I've mentioned—one more important thing must be covered. Kalidar music is partly built around silence. For a climax they don't always use a crescendo—sometimes they use nothing.

There you are, listening, as the scales wail up and sob down and suddenly—nothing. Dead silence. Except that if the prelude has been handled well your mind is still hearing the rhythm and abandons everything. It closes in on that mental pounding, since you are in a shocking pool of silence and there's nothing else to grab hold of. The pounding in your head gets louder and louder until it threatens to split your skull like an overblown balloon. You feel the tension straining every bone and muscle and when the recorders suddenly howl out again in the middle of a phrase at ten times the volume they started out with you don't even notice them—they are quieter than what your mind has been giving you and you know the climax came in that silence you could taste like a scum in your mouth.

A *tachika* piece usually ends pretty quickly after that bubble breaks.

Like I said, it's alien.

BUT as I was also saying, I was worried about how *tachika* would effect my playing and I was doubly worried since I had just seen it affect Sanderson's. I knew that a genius he was not, but I also knew

that he should have done better than he did, and I couldn't understand why he hadn't asked for silence while he played, so I asked him.

"Grissom," he said heavily, "there's something you had better learn and quickly. It's a sort of Golden Rule and I hoped you'd learn it while serving on a Japanese ship. But I guess not. So here it is. Don't question an alien custom. Tolerate it. You don't need to like it, but you have no business attacking it. You had just better learn to live with it. You understand that?"

"Yes," I said stubbornly. "But suppose it's not a custom. What if the Kals mixed *tachika* and shausta after they found *tachika* puts us into a coma? They must know it does that."

Sanderson nodded. "Maybe, but ours not to question why—ours but to do or die. They say it's custom so we take their word for it. Period."

And that was that. We didn't talk anymore that night since custom had skinned one Nathaniel Sanderson and had really skinned him bad.

And so here I am, five years later and getting pretty good at shausta myself and with a bit of evidence to back up my old friend's beliefs. That bit of evidence constitutes the second half of necessary interplanetary gambling knowledge. I learned it the hard way, but I think I'll spare you the pains. This is what happened three years ago on Sanderson's last run and my fourth.

Sanderson knew it was his last run and had decided to spend his last evening before we spaced with old friends. This left me on my own. So I went to a shausta house and put myself into the running.

"Greetings," welcomed Tarran, the proprietor. "It is good to see Grissom. *Sanka Maru* spaces tomorrow and we will not see Grissom for many months. Enjoy this evening for us."

"I'll do my best," I answered as I paid the entrance fee. "I'm sorry I haven't been in more often."

"This way, Grissom," he said without other comment—pleasantries had been dispensed with at the door. "Will please you to follow?"

In a shausta house the proprietor is god. I followed.

He led me to the gaming room and held open heavy, cast doors. He followed me in and the tongue of light our entrance had made disappeared. My sight went black and I struggled to adjust. I had no trouble picking out the red smudge pots hanging over every gaming post, but the faces below them remained tinted smears in the dark. Only the *tachika* players could be seen clearly, the twin white candles they

played by providing the needed light.

"There is one here who would play you, Grissom," whispered Tarran. "Have you objections?"

"No," I whispered back, still trying to pick out details. It couldn't hurt. I knew no one here and if someone knew me, fine. Besides, Kalidar custom says that you accept a seating request.

With a surety that my own confounded eyes found amazing, Tarran picked his way through the floor-seated throng and brought me to one of the red smudge pots. Only one shadowed figure sat at this one, not counting the gaming officials, but there was an unoccupied cushion. I sat down.

"Welcome, Grissom," whispered my opposite. "I am happy to see you before you space."

THAT voice was the first really pleasant surprise of the whole three-month run. It belonged to the one Kalidar on Mars I could almost consider a friend. He had a small mine in the outback and since I hadn't met him portside I had assumed he was out working it. It seemed that I was wrong.

"Lyrr," I said, too loudly for the heavy atmosphere. "This is a good meeting! When did you get in?"

A toothy grin flashed in the dark.

"Today, Grissom. I hear the *Maru* has grounded and hurry—but the desert is wide and my crawler breaks down. I have to walk!"

I returned the grin. Pleasant surprise number two: he had come all the way in from his claim to see me. Sanderson's circle of acquaintances had stirred my envy, but maybe, if my luck held, I might have one of my own. I started to speak, but as fate or whatever would have it, I didn't finish. A rich bass wail cut through the murk and a *tachika* piece began.

"Players," hissed the First Caller. "The placing of bets. You will decide who begins."

I looked at Lyrr. I could make out his face after a fashion, but his eyes still hid in pockets of shadow. I motioned for him to take the first round. He nodded and pulled out his credit sack. I matched him with my wallet.

"Three darro, Grissom?" he whispered.

Three darro. About a dollar.

I nodded. He smiled.

"The first number?" he asked and, as if in answer, the *tachika* recorder scuttled over its full range and the piece began in earnest. Tension made its first appearance.

"Four," said the First Caller.

The Action Determiner pulled a card.

"Six," said the Second Caller.

Lyrr thought for a moment, then

grinned at me. "Twenty-four," he said.

The computer, accepting card and punched-in numbers, clicked once. The screen went green and formed a ten. Lyrr gave me three darro credits and it was my turn. When the computer dispensed its answer I returned the notes.

That set the pace for the evening. One *tachika* piece ended; another began. The second ran down and a third filled the void. The bets became higher, the problems harder. I made my first calculating mistake, Lyrr his second. At no point did we stay more than ten darro richer or poorer than when we began. The *tachika* made me stumble on simple irrationals and before I knew it the irrationals were complex, with bets pushing two hundred and forty, two hundred and fifty, two hundred and sixty darro. I began to sweat. I began to sweat badly. Heck, I began to drip!

"The quantity three times the square root of one hundred and seventy-one over twenty-three," said the First Caller and I got out a two-hundred seventy note.

"The square root of eighteen over the square root of twenty-three," said the First Caller and I got it back.

A RIVER ran down my back. We had been playing some two and a half hours. If I could get the next one right I would be up some ninety dollars. If I lost—well, Lyrr would be happy. With a shock I remembered that I had never pushed over eighty before.

"The quantity five times the square root of twenty-seven over the quantity the square root of three," proposed the First Caller.

"Thirteen," said the second.

I breathed in. It didn't sound too hard, not hard at all provided I guessed the right action. I breathed out. It was multiplication. Believe me, I knew! I started figuring.

The square root of twenty-seven breaks down into three times the square root of three—three times five is fifteen—clear the bottom root by squaring and multiply the numerator by the square root of three. Fifteen times three over three—forty-five over three—fifteen! I had it! I was invincible!

And then, suddenly, the *tachika* music stopped.

But it was really only the sound that had stopped.

It was a silent crescendo—one of *the* silent crescendos. I thought I hadn't been listening closely enough—I had willed myself not to—but it was a vain hope. The *tachika* rhythm began sounding in my head, and with infuriating speed my mind closed in on it. Up and down, over and around, up and

thirteen times fifteen is up and down and the first beat of silence washed into me, turning my spine into ice and the up and down and beat number two sent my skeleton freezing clear out to the nerves and the down and around and the third squashed my mind into jelly and so help me God, I couldn't think! Forty seconds left and I couldn't think!

The fourth beat crested, worse than before. I felt myself explode.

"Stop that damned music," I shouted.

It stopped. Dead.

I had just about twenty seconds to spare.

Forty-five plus one hundred and fifty, I figured.

"One-hundred and ninety-five," I said, and the computer confirmed it. Lyrr passed me two-hundred and seventy darro credits. I smiled. I was alone in that.

The First Caller watched from behind his red-mask face. He motioned toward the *tachika* players.

"No," I said and their instruments stopped halfway.

"Grissom," whispered Lyrr.

"No," I repeated. "No music."

I was ninety dollars in the black. I was going to stay there. To you-know-where with Sanderson's rule. No Kal connivers were going to skin me that night. Even Lyrr, friendly, grinning, deceitful Lyrr, finally had turned against me.

Ever hear of gold fever?

THE First Caller regarded me solemnly. He rose and spoke to the players. The hiss of the Kalidar tongue drifted back across the room. The two gaunt musicians laid their recorders aside. They extinguished their candles and came to stand in the darkness around us. I became aware of a shifting center of attention. Our gaming post was collecting an audience.

Fine, I thought. *They deserve to watch.*

"Two hundred and eighty-five darro, Lyrr?" I suggested.

The mask of his face let no emotion slip. "Yes," he whispered. "Two hundred and eighty-five."

The tension began to build. Ninety-five dollars. Couldn't get much higher.

"Seventy-three and fifty-six hundredths," said the First Caller.

The Action Determiner pulled his card. He raised a clenched fist and Lyrr had his first power problem.

My mind raced, no longer restrained by *tachika.* Lyrr was good, but he wasn't a genius. He would probably square his number and hope. That was what I would have done. I don't know if the Kalidar pray.

"Three hundred and ninety-eight thousand thirty-eight and five

hundred seventy-four thousand sixteen millionths," said Lyrr.

I gaped. I was only part way through figuring it out for myself, but I could already see he had cubed it. My jaw swayed a little farther then. Only twenty seconds had flown.

The computer agreed with him—398038.574016.

I paid up uneasily. It was graphically clear that Lyrr was a genius with squares and cubes. This was his first such problem for the evening and now I was five in the red. In the next round I would probably slap myself further.

"Grissom," whispered Lyrr. "Two hundred and eighty-five darro?"

He wasn't increasing the bet. That suited me fine and I nodded.

"Negative sixty-three and seventy-two hundredths," said the First Caller. I went a hundred in the red.

But averages cut both ways. Lyrr would pull me out. I raised the bet by three darro and he agreed reluctantly. He had no choice. When the shock waves died down I owed him one hundred and ninety-six dollars. I had to write an I.O.U.

"Two hundred and eighty-eight darro?" he suggested slowly. I think he would have reduced it if custom hadn't stood in the way. I accepted.

Then divine providence stepped in. I got out the right answer with seconds to spare. The debt became smaller and the averages were overwhelmingly bad for Lyrr.

"Three hundred darro," I hissed and we hit the highest ceiling. There was no grin from the other side.

"Ninety-two and twenty-nine thousandths," whispered the First Caller.

"Twenty-seven and one hundred and three thousandths," breathed the Second.

A general inhalation rose from the shadows around us. The whole house was watching. Lyrr sat in silence, his eyes still hidden in black pockets, but the red mask was creased and damp. My foot was falling asleep with nettle-like tingles.

"Two thousand four hundred and ninety-four and two hundred sixty-one thousand nine hundred and eighty-seven millionths," said Lyrr, not looking up.

The computer verified his figure—2494.261987— and the game ended in bedlam.

SOMEHOW I scrawled another I.O.U. and made my way out of the milling, dark-shrouded crowd. Somehow I remembered how the low-pressure air-lock worked and remembered to turn on my respirator before breathing the near-

vacuum outside. Then I was walking away from the shausta house, moving numbly toward the port, where floodlights lent a carnival air to the loading of *Sanka Maru*.

"Grissom," said a voice. Lyrr, of course.

I stumbled on without looking up. I could barely hear his feet hitting the sand beside me.

"Grissom." He sighed, accepting a bad loser. "I wish to return your money."

"No," I growled.

"Yes," he said. "Money gained by cheating is not worth one's keeping. I return it."

The bills pressed into my fist. I took them automatically.

"Grissom," continued Lyrr, "is not surprising you think we are cheaters. *Tachika* dulls you and because you see us figure badly you think we are trying to gain an advantage. But you are wrong. *Tachika* came to the shausta house long before the Kalidar came to Mars. It is only to make things fair."

I was listening uncomfortably.

"Sanderson, he got angry one time, too. I was not there, but the story stays. He stopped the *tachika* and was beaten as you were. Then we Kalidar thought it fun, but we have since learned differently. It is cheating to use something another has not, even if you are born with it.

"Grissom, we Kalidar are good with numbers, as you can see, but there is something more. Among ourselves we are also telepaths. We can try to shut out errant thoughts, but even so, when the Action Determiner looks at a card, in my head I know what action he sees. That is why we have *tachika*. It dulls you, but it dulls us even more and it screens out telepathy to make shausta a game instead of an exercise. It is not to dull humans, but to dull the Kalidar."

I stopped and looked at him.

"You know, Lyrr?" I said. "I've been a fool. What Sanderson said wasn't drivel."

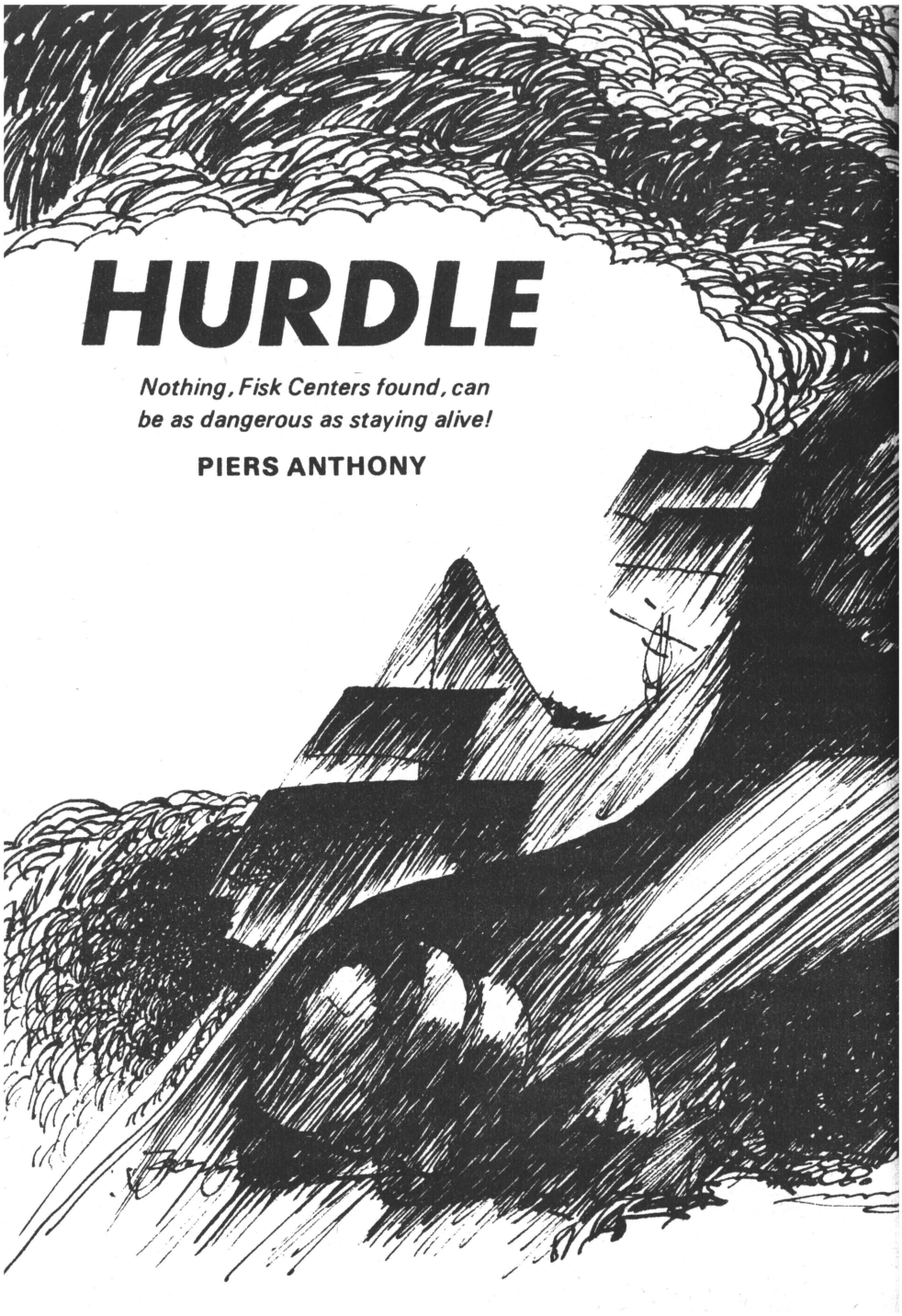
He couldn't understand me, but he grinned regardless. I could see his eyes now in the glare from the port and they certainly weren't grim.

"Grissom," he said, "when does *Sanka Maru* space? Early or late in the morning?"

"Neither," I told him. "Middle of the afternoon."

"Then come," he said abruptly. "Rest at my home this evening. There is time in the morning for you to get back and there is much I need to know of Earth—what customs not to break in chance-playing!"

So I went home with him and taught him poker. ●


HURDLE
Nothing, Fisk Centers found, can be as dangerous as staying alive!
PIERS ANTHONY

I

"UP, FISK," Yola said. "Earn your daily bonus and commission or else."

Fisk Centers rolled over groggily. "Else what?"

"This." An avalanche of icy foam descended on his head.

He struggled up, gasping for breath, suddenly wide awake. "What was that for?"

"Well, I did warn you," she said contritely. "You look like a walrus surfacing."

"Nonsense. I don't have tusks."

"A toothless walrus, then. Fat, wet, stupid—"

"You're about to look like a spanked brat."

"No time," she said. "Bolt your food, Fisky. Today you go to work for your living."

"What makes you so sure I'll have any better luck today than I've had all week?"

"Because you handled the week. I set up today. While you snored."

"I should have stayed single," Fisk muttered as he stumbled to the suiter and let it dry and dress him. "Or at least gotten married. The last thing any sane man would do is become an adoptive father to a pre-teen hellion."

"Right," she agreed. "Especially when he has to live off her money."

"That's my money! Twenty per cent commission just for—"

"For selling an innocent child on the black mar—"

"Shut up." He stepped out of the suiter, resplendent in blue jeans, checkered shirt and goggles. "What did you do to the setting?" he roared.

"You look just right for your job," she said. "Hurry up."

He tore off the goggles. "My job—doing what?"

"Selling cars, of course."

"Cars? I'm no mechanic—"

"That's all you know, Dad. Salesmen don't have to know anything about the workings. Just believe in your product and sell, sell, sell!"

Fisk punched a soyomelet. "Believe in my product? I haven't even *driven* a car for five years." He took a bite, but paused before masticating it. "What car am I supposed to sell?"

"Fusion. They've got a real nice commission deal—"

The mouthful of omelet sprayed over the table. "The atomic racer? The radioactive juggernaut that makes the obituary headlines every other week? The—"

"The same. They're making a play for the middle-class market and they need middle-class salesmen. Hot chance for you."

"Hot? Listen, Yola—do you realize that my annuities don't

mature for another twenty-five years and are voided in the event of deliberate suicide? If I die tomorrow in a Fusion you inherit nothing."

"Term life insurance," she answered. "That's their bonus. Life and commissions. You live off the commissions, of course. But if you die—"

"Enough, child. The longer I listen to you the worse I feel. I'm not going near any—"

"Suit yourself," she said. "We'll run out of money tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? There's enough for at least another week."

"You forget you have a family to support. Two don't live as cheaply as one, you know." She paused, serious and for the moment rather pretty in her brown-faced way. "Fisk, it's a good chance for you. I thought you'd really go for a decent income—"

Fisk sighed. "I'll talk to the man. But it had better be strictly salesroom. If I have to go near a living Fusion I'll resign on the spot."

"Sure," she said. "Come on—you're due to report in twenty minutes."

"FISK CENTERS? Right," the executive at Fusion Motors said briskly as Fisk introduced himself. "Your daughter here set it up. Glad to have a man of your experience with us."

"Experience? I haven't—"

Yola tromped his toe and Fisk realized that she had invented suitable qualifications for him. Time to set that straight right now. He took a breath.

"You're in the weekly Hurdle, starting at ten today," the man said.

Fisk's breath wooshed out. "I beg your—"

The man guided him out through a service exit, led him into a massive garage filled with menacing machinery. "Bill, he's here."

Fisk tried again. "Look, I don't know what she told you, but I'm not—"

"Here's your co-pilot, Bill. Bill, this is Fisk. Used to be with Ferrari before the antipolluters closed down their commercial branch. Drove in the antarctic cross-country a couple times, maybe twenty years ago. Going to sell for us. I want him to get a real feel for the Fusion, but you'll have to carry the burden this time."

"Great," Bill said, shaking Fisk's hand with a grip of steel and rubber. "Come on, Fisk. We've got just thirty-five minutes to blastoff and you'll need briefing."

"But I—"

"Don't get me wrong," Bill said, hustling him along while Yola trot-

ted excitedly behind. "I'm not putting down your experience. But there's been a lot of development in the past two decades and most of it has been led by Fusion. And the Hurdle is a real workout. If anything happens to me you'll have to take over—because the finish line's the only safe exit. Ever drive over five hundred before?"

"Well, I—" Then it occurred to Fisk that Bill wasn't talking about distance and certainly not about regular highway travel. Stunned, he fumbled for a suitable way to set things straight immediately.

Yola caught up. She smiled sweetly at Bill. "Can I come, too? I love racing—"

Bill looked at her with leathery compassion. "Sorry, kid. No juniors allowed. This is a rough course and it changes every week. You'll have to watch it on the customer screen. Mine's the purple Eight."

"Oh." She looked dangerously sullen, but fell back.

"Bill, there's been a misunderstanding," Fisk said, already out of breath because of the pace Bill was setting through the monstrous garage. "I can't—I never—"

"Here she is," Bill said proudly, pulling up at a tremendous sculptured vehicle with eight massive wheels. "Hop in. We'll get strapped while the tug takes her there. I'll brief you while we're moving." He gave Fisk a powerful boost into the open cockpit.

The moment the two men landed in the firm molded seats, the tug started hauling the car out of its niche and down a ramp. Bill saw to Fisk's complex protective harness before attending to his own.

"But I'm only supposed to be a salesman," Fisk protested. "I can't get involved in a race. I have absolutely no—"

"No problem. Boss always breaks in the new men like this. Idea is you don't need to know every detail about the car—you just have to believe in it absolutely, and the details will take care of themselves. So we don't load you down with statistics and all that junk—we just show you. Once you've raced the Fusion Special you're a believer."

"But I'm trying to tell you that I don't know the first thing about—"

"Sure. The boss explained. You've never touched the Fusion before. And twenty years is a long, long time in racing. We'd have let you sit it out this week, but my regular co-pilot isn't out of the hospital yet. But I know you've got the stuff. I used to watch that antarctic cross-country when I was a kid. Those glaciers, those ice crevasses—" He shook his head. "Hell, the hurdle isn't rougher than

that. But it is different—and you've got to ride it several times before you get the feel. So I'll drive and you just handle the map—okay? Nobody tackles a new race in a new car cold."

APPALLED, Fisk could only nod. At this point it almost seemed better to take the horrible ride and keep his mouth shut. At least the driver was competent and it would be a one-time experience.

"Actually, that map is important," Bill said consolingly. "I can't take my eyes off the track when I'm at speed. They do it that way to make sure the race stays fair. New track for each run—nobody knows the specific layout until the race starts and then he has to figure his strategy from the map. Yours is a necessary job and don't you doubt it for a moment. One misreading and we're dead."

Fisk came to an abrupt decision—he would blurt out the truth and get released from this race right now. "Bill, I—"

"I wouldn't drive without a mapman. My co-pilot tried that a couple weeks ago, when I was out at the last minute with intestinal grippe. You know—bathroom every ten minutes, ready or not. Didn't dare drive. So he took it alone, because you can't get a replacement at the last moment and we didn't want our entry scratched. That's why he cracked up—trying to read the map before he got of the tunnel—" Bill shook his head. "Fifteen hours in surgery and he'll have to drive next time with a prosthetic hand and a plate in his skull. Ran over his insurance and he's got a family to support. That's why I have to run a good race this time. Got to help him out."

Fisk realized that if he spoke out now Bill would have no co-pilot. Then he would have either to take it alone, risking the same fate that had wiped out his partner, or drop out of the race entirely. Then his friend's medical bills would ruin his family.

Fisk well understood the problems of financial ruin. He had been a moderately wealthy man not so long ago. Being broke was not a fate he would wish on anyone.

". . . true dual-purpose car," Bill was saying. He evidently liked to talk. "Motor's always at full power, of course, so the clutch guides it. Not the kind of clutch you knew, eh? No gearing. Just engage for the percentage of power you want. Depress gently and you've got a gentle touring car. Goose it and you've got a real racer. I use a model just like this for city traffic—"

What could Fisk do but stick with it? Racing terrified him and

not just because of his health—but more was riding on this race than his preferences.

". . . duplicate controls, but yours will be inactive. Except for the indicators—you need to watch them in case of emergency. Regular steering wheel, you see; nothing complicated. Fusion's designed for the simple-minded—that's why I like it. And over here—"

The tug was maneuvering the car into the starting stall. A giant chronometer above was ticking off the last seconds before the start. Fisk squirmed in his harness, feeling cold sweat on his palms, face and underarms. He hoped that the term insurance was for a large amount.

"The map will fall into the fax hopper there as the gun goes off," Bill said. "Grab it and—"

A FAINT pop came through the armored hull. Paper dropped. And the car ground forward with such authority that it was all Fisk could do to breathe. There was very little noise. Pollution-control had really clamped down on loud sports jobs; both the hydrogen/helium fusion engine and the mercury vapor working fluid were almost silent. Also, it seemed, the cockpit was soundproof.

Fisk had to admit it—this *was* a nice piece of machinery.

Competing cars shot out of their stalls. Blue, white, green, red yellow—internal combustion, steam, electric, jet, atomic and assorted hybrids. The car industry had claimed that stiff antipollution standards would ruin it, but in fact they had led to a marvelous flowering of superior new types. The money that had once been wasted on planned obsolescence of style now went into improvement of mechanics. Drivers still had to buy a new car every three years, but now they obtained a superior product in each new model. And this was where that superiority was demonstrated—in professional competition, using the cars sold in the showrooms. It was a drag race start: thirty bright vehicles straining forward on a ten-mile straightaway. No noise or fumes.

Fisk sneaked a look at the speedometer. His duplicate was functioning, but it took him a moment to find the mph scale among the massed dials and digits. The main readings were feet per second and kilometers per hour, but he was pedestrian enough to orient on old-fashioned miles per hour. They were already doing 150, and accelerating rapidly. And the other cars were keeping pace or pulling ahead, so that the group velocity was deceptive.

"Look at the map," Bill shouted. "What's the first hurdle?"

Fisk opened the map hastily and scanned it. He had been daydreaming while his very life was at stake in an obstacle race at hundreds of miles per hour.

"The Narrows," he said.

"The Narrows? That's a stiff location, but good for us. Hang on—we'll have to push it."

And, astonishingly, the acceleration increased. The Fusion began gaining on other cars.

"I thought you were all-out before," Fisk gasped.

"Hardly. This is the finest car ever made, overall. The Fusion's got more actual muscle than any car on the market—and unlimited range. It has a little piece of the sun inside, you know—that's the heat of the conversion, four hydrogen atoms transforming into one helium atom in controlled fusion. Fuel's no problem—it's loaded when we make it and it runs on just a little bit of hydrogen until the car is junked. We have no top speed, really—car would shake apart before we ever reached maximum. Only limiting factor—oh, don't worry, we won't shake apart—in a race like this is the frictive surface: the tires. That's why we've got eight—and they're broad ones, too. But too much acceleration makes them skid a bit and that's bad for control and worse for wear. Got to save the rubber or we'll have trouble finishing, even though the tires are solid. Guess you were still on pneumatics in the antarctic, huh?"

"I guess." Fisk realized that he had just received lesson one in Fusion salesmanship. The car was so powerful that even solid composition tires could wear out of round in the course of an hour.

And Bill was taking that risk now. The Fusion was overhauling car after car. The speedometer read—Fisk looked again, astonished—390 mph . . . 395 . . . 400 and still rising. Air whistled past the little winglike vanes on the sides that were necessary for control at such velocity—even the soundproofing could not eliminate every vestige of that hurricane keening. 410 mph . . .

Bill was right. Telling a prospective salesman about the Fusion could not have been nearly as efficient as showing him, regardless of his presumed experience. When he got into the showroom and a customer asked him about power and speed Fisk would not need any artifice to describe the car. He had seen it in action, seen the other racers falling behind at 430 . . .

II

"YOU haven't raced before," Bill observed mildly.

And it was out at last—too late. "I tried to tell you, but—"

Bill smiled. "But you're a sucker for a sob story."

"Oh-oh. You mean to say your co-pilot didn't—"

"No, he did, all right. I do need this money for him. But nine men out of ten would not risk their own necks in a grind like this to help out someone they'd never seen. You're too soft-hearted. I'll bet you've been stepped on more than once or you wouldn't be looking for a job at your age."

"Close enough."

"Don't worry about it, Fisk. Lots of people sneer because they haven't got the guts to be decent when the heat is on. I knew you weren't a racer the moment I saw you. You don't have racer's ways. But I wasn't going to embarrass the boss right before a race—and I did need a mapman."

"And you're a bit soft yourself," Fisk said. "Helping your friend, sparing your boss, giving me a chance at a job—"

Bill laughed easily. "Takes one to know one, doesn't it? Little girl set it up, right? Wanted her daddy to be a big man? Well, you are one—and not because of any fancy race. Got a child like that myself—wouldn't trade her. No, I'll cover for you, Fisk. They can't hear us here. Only contact is the radio and that's one-way—in. On the public band. So no driver can sneak in tactical info during the race. You're an honest man and I like that, so I stopped you from making an ass of yourself, or seeming to. Man quits a race at the start, the word spreads that he's chicken, no matter what the facts. After this you'll be a racer officially—and nobody has to know the difference."

Fisk was beginning to find the man's solicitude a bit confining. "But it isn't honest to—"

"It isn't right to make a scene right before a race, embarrassing the company and hurting the little girl's feelings. Got to choose your course in a hurry—even when the best one is ragged. That's racing. I figured more people would be better off this way, so this is how I played it. Okay?"

What was there to say?

"Okay," Fisk agreed reluctantly.

Then he saw the end of the track: slanting walls of concrete foam narrowed the thirty-car highway into twenty, ten, five lanes. Bill maneuvered the vehicle around the few remaining leaders with minute but expert turns of his steering wheel that nevertheless brought anguished squeals from the massive tires. At 500 mph he passed his last competitor and slammed into the Narrows.

"New leader and winner of the

first heat, Fusion!" a voice announced. Fisk jumped, then realized that it was the car radio. The race was being broadcast to the sports fans of the world.

"Sales: Fusion twenty-four, Steamco nineteen, Duperjet seventeen—"

"Hear that?" Bill cried happily. "The sales follow the performance, roughly. Usually the winner of a Hurdle is good for a hundred and fifty contracts or more right during the race. Much more if something spectacular happens. We're ahead where it counts."

Fisk was amazed. "You mean people are buying cars while they watch?"

"They sure are. When a car makes a good move, the saleslines light up. Impulse buyers. Want to own a car with class. We're selling Fusions right now, Fisk—one per cent commission on the gross goes to the driver. Five hundred dollars per unit, if they take the Special—less for the tamer models, though no Fusion is really tame. If I run well this time and sell a hundred cars—that's twenty-five grand. Pretty good for a week's pay. Of course I don't always finish—then I get nothing. And most races I make less than ten grand when I do place. And I'd have to finish at least second or third just to cover my friend's medical expenses if I wanted to do it in one race. But it's a living. I figure to retire after I make one really big killing—if it isn't myself I'm killing."

"I SEE," Fisk said, chilled by the concept and by the rapidly closing walls of the Narrows. Five hundred miles per hour was an outrageous speed for a car and now that there was something to measure it against outside . . .

"Oh, sorry—I didn't mean to rub it in, pal. You aren't a regular driver, so that commission doesn't apply to you. But I'll tell them you helped a lot and if we do well the company'll give you a nice starting bonus. Your commissions will come mostly from your showroom sales."

Fisk's concern had been about the danger, not the money, but he didn't push the matter.

Bill braked, using small parachutes that blossomed and dragged behind the car. They provided a steady reduction of speed without sluing. Fisk was glad they did. The Narrows, according to the map, was a one-lane chute with thick twelve-foot-high barricades on either side. No vehicle could pass another here and some of the curves could be disastrous at peak velocity.

Studying the map at this point was foolish—Fisk raised his eyes to

his surroundings. The crisscrossed timbers were invisible at this range, merely a graying of the view, but he knew they were timbers of steel. Speed here was less essential than control. Any accident would block the Narrows. Bill had ensured his own passage and placement by entering first.

A faint rattle sounded in the car. Bill cocked an ear alertly. "Check your gauges," he snapped to Fisk. "Probably that was an irregularity in the track—felt like it. But just in case—"

Fisk scanned the dials and lights. "All green and in normal range."

"Right. Some of these buggies are more maneuverable at speed," Bill explained as he sweated the Fusion down and through. "They could leave us behind on a track like this—if they could pass us. We're heavy and prone to chassis stresses. Not the fault of the car—it's inherent in the mass and much of that mass is shielding that we simply have to have. If any of those other cars carried our weight penalty they wouldn't have a chance in this race. But here in the Narrows we lose no ground. If anything's wrong we can slow down and check it out. Next straightaway we'll show 'em dust! What's next on the map?"

"Hairpin."

"Say, we're really in luck! That's our worst time loser and now we've got first crack at it. The big ugly god of Hurdle racers must be smiling on us. We might even win this one, baby!"

Bill continued to slow, but even at 150 the huge racer skewed and tilted on the gentle curves, alarming Fisk.

They shot out of the Narrows and into Hairpin at a comparative crawl of 120 mph. Bill slued into the approach, deliberately skidding the rear wheels and braking. The car behind the Fusion was a jet. Fisk watched it in the rear-view screen so as not to have to watch the nightmare ahead. He knew the jet's wheels were merely for support. The only thing that stopped it from being a flyaway winner on the straightaway was the pollution damping—its flaming exhaust had to meet almost prohibitive standards of emission control. It was, of course, chemically fueled and could not travel as far as the Fusion.

Bill whipped around another killer bend of the Hairpin at 90 while metal groaned and dirt flew wide. Fisk thought he heard another rattling, but decided that it was caused by the spray of pebbles thrown up against the bottom of the vehicle. Outside each curve was a six-foot drop-off onto an escape lane—the turn had to be made tightly for there was no second chance.

"Fusion still leads," the radio announced. "Excellent tactics in a slow second heat. Sales: Fusion twenty-six, Duperjet twenty-one . . ."

"Not much pickup on the Narrows," Bill explained in fragmentary fashion between the body-smashing maneuvers. He was heel-and-toeing it now, working accelerator clutch and wheelbrake almost simultaneously with his right foot while his left controlled the movable windvanes for additional control. The parachute brakes had been jettisoned—they could not be turned on and off like this. Fisk was amazed Bill still had concentration for chatter while performing such heroic feats. "I held up the line. Crowd likes action. But we're in good field position. Watch us go once we pass Hairpin."

He braked down to 60 for the sharpest bend. Fisk thought the turn impossible—it looked like the point of a knife.

And someone ran out into the track.

FISK became faint with horror, but Bill's reaction time was like an old-fashioned mousetrap. He swerved to miss the figure, throwing the car into a four-wheel tilt, and careened off the bank to drop into the escape lane. The two men bounced like yoyos in their harnesses as the great car landed, but they and it took the fall without physical damage.

The jet following did likewise, landing more gently because it had only half the Fusion's mass. It pulled up even.

The lane had no passing room. The cars jostled together and spun. The side vane of the jet cut through the Fusion's bubble top, opening a neat ineision in the shatterproof material. Then the lighter car shot ahead, reorienting in a fine display of equilibrium and blasting back down the intercept lane to rejoin the race. Missing a turn did not, it seemed, disqualify a car but merely delayed it.

Already three other cars had navigated this fold of the Hairpin and more were coming. The dust was rising higher as the road eroded. The remaining entries would be taking the curve virtually blind—another disadvantage of trailing the leaders.

Bill guided the car to a safe slowdown, then slapped a hand to his head. "Get her moving," he said thickly. "The—"

Fisk saw blood.

"My controls don't—" he began, but paused as he saw Bill slump. How badly had the man been injured? The harness prevented him from looking more closely.

"New leader," the radio an-

nounced. "Fusion and Duperjet spun out on Hairpin. Steamco is now first. Sales: Steamco thirty-two, Fusion—one moment, the cancellations are still coming in—Fusion twenty-one, Dupererjet fifteen . . ."

The car was blocking the sole escape lane. Any car that missed the turn would shoot right this way at sixty or better, probably out of control. The ballooning dust guaranteed that the on-rushing vehicle would not see the Fusion in time to stop, even if it were in condition to do so.

Something knocked on the bubbel and for a heartbeat Fisk thought a collision had already occurred. But the figure who had started this disaster by materializing in the forbidden territory of the Hurdle Hairpin had rematerialized and was dancing outside. This time Fisk recognized her.

"Yola!" he cried in dismay. He should have known.

She yelled something, he couldn't make out in the confusion. Then she pointed at Bill.

"Duperjet clipped him, thanks to you—" Fisk shouted.

"Fisk, let me in!" Her voice came through the unnatural vent.

He found the canopy switch on Bill's side and jerked it. The bubbletop yanked itself up, its ripped portion catching, then springing loose. Yola jumped about inside.

"Close up and get rolling," she ordered, settling into Bill's inert lap. "First car that misses that pretzel—pow!"

An apt summation. "But I can't—my controls don't—"

"Don't give me that. You'll kill us all—" She looked back. "Here comes one now!"

Fisk's hand found the changeover switch and his foot came down on the accelerator clutch. The car lunged aimlessly, all eight wheels spinning in the dirt. He grabbed at the steering wheel, easing up enough on the clutch to let the wheels catch.

"But there's nowhere to go—" he protested belatedly.

"Back on the main track, stupid! We've got to get this guy to a doctor. He's bleeding—"

And Fisk was somehow guiding the behemoth down the track at rapidly accelerating velocity. His lightest pressure on the pedal elicited a surge of brute animation that was frightening in its strength. No car was behind—that had been a false alarm. But he knew they could not have remained in the escape lane—and Yola was right about Bill. The man was hurt and every minute that kept him from medical attention might reduce his chances of survival. The only way out was straight ahead.

THEN a car did appear in the escape lane, nosing out of the dust cloud as though from a brown tunnel, and Fisk involuntarily goosed the Fusion back onto the main track, his tires screaming as he turned. Fortunately for him there were no further hairpin loops.

"What are we in for next?" he asked her, his hands sweating. He was moving the monster—but how long could he control it? Every time he pushed down on the pedal the wheels destroyed themselves a little in their effort to accelerate the vehicle instantly. But it was either ride this tiger or be smashed flat by the one following.

Yola scrabbled for the map, which had strewn itself across Fisk's feet. "The Elevated," she said. "Better get up speed."

"No, thank you. I'm doing eighty now—and I know my limits. We're just going to limp out the safest way we can find and—what were you doing on the track, anyway?"

"Have it your way," she said with affected nonchalance. "But I'm a race fan from way back and I think you'd better get it up. Ever see the El on the newscreen?"

"Brilliant recovery by Duperjet," the radio blared. "Fusion is not out of the race, but trails the pack and is moving erratically. Sales: Duperjet fifty-five, Steamco forty-nine, Gasturb thirty . . ."

"Never watched sports." He looked around nervously. "Look, Yola—Bill's a nice guy and it's your fault he's hurt. See if you can bandage him up—or something."

"What do I know about first-aid?" she demanded as rebelliously as always when told to do something. But she began looking in the car pockets for the medical supplies that had to be there.

" . . . and Fusion twelve—no, ten."

Fisk saw what lay ahead of them. "That?"

"What do you think? Watch those cars behind you."

Fisk saw them come up on him at an alarming clip as they navigated the last of Hairpin and accelerated. The track was widening here, but one slow vehicle could be disaster. He speeded up.

Yola found a rolled bandage and began stretching it out. Fisk knew her hands were dirty—they always were—but kept his peace. Infection was the least of his present concerns. "We're taking a beating at the box office," she said. "But we're still in the race and we're not last either. Yet."

Still the cars came, showing no inclination to avoid a possible crash. Fisk's adrenalin squirted. He stamped down hard and the car surged forward as though its speed of a hundred miles per hour had

been mere idling. It was a fine piece of machinery and it could hardly perform like this if it had suffered mechanical damage in the accident. There was, indeed, a certain exhilaration in managing a brute like this, Fisk discovered.

They were booming up the steep approach ramp of the Elevated. The combination of acceleration and angle shoved the riders back into their seats, hard. Yola balanced precariously and Fisk felt the first twinge of nausea. He had a circulatory disorder that could be aggravated by sustained physical stress. Ordinarily it didn't bother him—token medication kept the symptoms suppressed—but ordinarily he didn't tackle obstacle races in 500-mph juggernauts.

Yola complained, "His neck is all icky with hair and gore—I can't make the bandage stay."

"Then hold it in place with your hand," Fisk rasped, resenting the need to split his concentration and expend his breath in a situation like this. "We've got to keep him from bleeding too much. If Bill hadn't swerved to avoid you—"

She uttered a monosyllable Fisk didn't recognize—fortunately. He was pretty sure it would have earned her another week in solitary back at the orphanage from whence she sprang. But somehow she fixed the bandage in place.

THEN they were up, other cars ahead and behind. Ahead also stretched mind-numbing miles of twisted ribbon, five hundred feet above the ground, tapering into a thread in the distance, though it was four lanes wide.

Two following cars charged past, the whine of their tires momentarily loud. The odor of oil and hot rubberoid swirled in through the rent in the bubble.

Yola sneezed. "There can't be many more behind us," she muttered, torn between hope and regret. She clung to the straps of Bill's harness as the incoming gusts swept black hair across her brown face. "But don't stop now—you have to take the El at speed or you fall off."

She was speaking literally. The paving contorted like a living tapeworm, given animation by his speed of 170 mph. In addition, the hole in the bubble interfered with the streamline contour and created a dangerous drag that Fisk seemed to feel all the way down to the sliding tires. But their forward momentum was not enough. The road tilted now into a forty-five degree embankment—he would indeed fall off unless he maintained speed sufficient to match the needs of the curve.

"Yeah," Yola said, licking her lips. At eleven, with her deprived

background, she was more enthusiastic than afraid. He hadn't really needed to ask why she had sneaked into the racegrounds. She had done so because it was forbidden. She had wanted a ride and now she had it. Quite possibly her last.

More wind blasted in as he accelerated. "Close up that hole," Fisk snapped as another warning wave of dizziness came over him. The blood circulation to his brain was being inhibited—but to stop was to die. Already they were sliding toward the nether perimeter and the drag was making matters worse. He had to keep turning the wheel and bearing down on the pedal to counter the drift. But if he accelerated too strongly and broke the wheels free of the surface . . .

"Don't tell me what to do!" Yola flared.

Fisk twitched the wheel the other way. The Fusion jerked toward the rail. The bright water of a scenic lake spread below—a natural safety net. But they could drown, for the massive car would plummet to the bottom.

"Okay! Okay!" she exclaimed with bad grace. "You're the driver—" She dug out some harness strap and additional bandage and wedged the mass into the gap. It helped.

Now Fisk was able to gain the speed he needed: 200 . . . 250 . . . 280—finally the drift abated and they were cruising in a kind of stasis. It was, actually, rather pleasant in its way—the velocity anesthetized his sense of proportion and the balancing forces lulled his circulatory incapacity. What remained was a growing sense of well-being and power. He was no longer Fisk the hard-sell sucker—he was Fisk the Supreme! The Secret Life of Fisk Centers . . .

Then the curvature and banking reversed.

Fisk was driving for his life and there was suddenly no joy in it. He slued across the strip at 300 mph without any exact knowledge where he was going or how long he could last. His brain tried to black out. He tilted his head back as far as he could, trying to let the blood in his system flow level to the gray region that needed it.

"Slow up! Speed down!" Yola screamed. "Watch the sky below!" Which was just about the way Fisk saw it.

"Duperjet is still the leader," the radio announced. "Sales: Duperjet seventy-eight, Steamco sixty, Electro forty-four . . ."

THE tilt decreased and the car was rolling down the steep exit slope at 350 mph. Fisk knew there had been many miles of elevated ribbon and that he had covered

every twist at daredevil speed, but his memory had a short-term blank on the subject. That was fortunate for his equanimity, unfortunate for his security, since memory lapse was another signal of his functional impairment. Nothing but blind reflex had carried him through, but before long his reflexes would cut out, too.

Yola sat silent and staring. The ride must have been good to faze her like that, Fisk thought.

"... Fusion thirteen ..."

At the foot of the ramp was an impenetrable bank of fog. The road led directly into it.

Fisk sighed. No way to avoid it. This was obviously part of the course. Another hurdle. He turned on lights, searing beams of brilliance that might well have been windowed from the solar activity of the engine, but the best they could do here was about two hundred feet. The car was moving at more than five hundred feet per second, according to the relevant scale of the speedometer—360 mph. How many seconds would it take him to come to a stop?

He applied the brakes. The car slowed with neck-wrenching suddenness. Bill groaned. Good—the sound proved he was alive. The smell of burning rubberoid infiltrated from somewhere.

"Keep moving!" Yola screamed.

"Fogbank always has stuff in it—"

A gap opened in the road. By the time Fisk reacted, it was too late to react. The car hurtled the twenty foot void with no more than a nasty jolt.

"Try that at half the speed," Yola muttered faintly.

Fisk had to agree with her. Undervelocity was just as dangerous here as overvelocity. His conservative course was to maintain middle-range speed—say 300 mph.

A wall appeared, made of stone and steel by its look.

Fisk swerved left barely in time. The wall was oblique, cutting across the lane only gradually, right to left. His instinct had been accurate and he had dodged the hurdle.

"Try *that* at half speed," he mimicked.

"Luck," Yola said disparagingly, as though her own life were not part of the stakes.

Not all of the fog was outside. Fisk's arms were becoming leaden on the wheel and his eyelids felt heavy. His system had taken just about all it was going to. He was out of adrenalin. Wisps of cloud passed between his face and the instrument panel—or perhaps between his eyes and brain.

"Wake up!" Yola screamed.

Fisk snapped alert, laughing—and momentarily felt refreshed, ready to continue another couple of

minutes. He was giving Yola all the thrills she had asked for—and more.

"Duperjet is out of the race," the radio announced. "Crackup in the Slalom—"

Fisk bounced over a washboard trap and emerged from the fog. Fogbank hadn't actually been so bad. It would have been another matter in the press of the pack, however.

THEY were out of the fog and into a forest. Green concrete pseudotrees or pilings rose from the highway in a seemingly solid mass. They were cold—ice had formed on them and snow coated the ground.

"The Slalom," Yola said despairingly. "Doom!"

But the pilings were less impenetrable than they seemed from a distance. In the seconds it took to reach the first, Fisk saw that they were spaced well apart. There was room to skid around them if forward progress were not excessive. The tracks of many wheels showed the routes other cars had taken.

But across the main trail were wheels themselves, and jagged pieces of metal—the debris of a recent accident strewed across the course. Duperjet, surely. This was dangerous territory.

" . . . Fusion nineteen . . . Duperjet nine . . ."

The buyers certainly had little sympathy for a loser. Yet Duperjet was a fine car. It had led the pack after that spinout. Fusion was recovering sales—but what a grisly way to succeed.

Fisk was falling under the sway of stress fatigue again. He willed his remaining strength into his hands and aimed the vehicle at the widest aperture between groups of pilings, following the common trail. Here and there the refrigerative grid showed, scraped temporarily bare by the passage of the pack, giving him slightly improved footing. He was still doing over 300 mph and he knew better than to attempt to change speed here.

Yola covered her eyes. "You drive like a zombie," she said.

The trail split. A piling lay dead ahead. Fisk forced a message down along the resistive nerve tissue of his right arm and the arm convulsed a bit, pulling the wheel around just that necessary fraction. The car slued, scraping against the piling on the left and almost disloging Yola's hole-stuffing. At this point Fisk hardly cared—it was as though car and racetrack were far away. Even his own extremities were almost beyond reach. His heart was laboring to the point of collapse, but the life-sustaining blood was not getting through. He was numb and terribly tired.

Yet he would not let go entirely. He hung on. A thin rivulet of animation trickled along the buried conduits of his pallid flesh. As the pilings loomed his muscles twitched and the car shaved by, never quite hitting, never quite sacrificing the traction so necessary to keep it from following the Duperjet into destruction. But Fusion's huge mass gave it traction where a lighter car might have skated. The impact of their passage howled about the myriad death traps of the Slalom—if he had been the lyrical type he might have immortalized the experience in poetry—and then they were out of it.

"We're alive," Yola whispered, amazed. "At least I am. For a while I almost wished I was back at the orphanage." She looked at Fisk. "You can stop here. We're out of the woods and nobody's behind us any more."

Fisk ignored her. Now he faced a straightaway, long and level and dry. Far ahead he could see several other cars. The Fusion had actually gained on them during this last hurdle. The race wasn't over yet—and as long as he was in it, why not win it?

III

IT WAS madness, he knew—the futile delusion of grandeur of an oxygen-starved brain, its frontal lobes anesthetized. He didn't care. Bill needed a large sales tally for his friend's medical bills—and perhaps for his own. Fisk was indirectly responsible for the Fusion's fall from first to last place in the Hurdle and for Bill's injury. There was power under his foot if not in his body or brain. Why not invoke it, double or nothing?

"Daddy, what are you doing?" Yola whispered as the car accelerated.

"You wilful little brat—you got me into this," he snapped. "Now you're going to see it through."

He was mad—insane, not angry. His brain had gone berserk and was running faster than the car. He had never suffered this effect of his malady before. It was as though another personality had fought to the surface—a completely un-Fisk monster. No, not true. This was his true personality. Shackled by decades of civilized restraint, it had emerged at last.

"So it's like that, Centers," Yola muttered. "Well, want to know what's next? The Mountain."

Fisk-normal quailed, but the demon aspect who had usurped control of his body said in fine detergent-opera fashion, "Yeah? So watch this." And his right foot crunched down harder.

The speedometer read 400 mph.

It climbed rapidly as the tireless machine obeyed the imperious command of a lunatic.

"Steamco eighty-six, Electro fifty-nine, Gasturb forty-nine . . ." the radio said and continued on through the entire list of twenty-six cars remaining in the race. Fusion was back up to twenty-four.

The car was doing 500 now and Fisk's foot was a marvel of unremitting ponderosity. This was a fair-sized straightaway—the kind where power counted. Fusion's favorite track. The gap between him and the pack was closing. How much would this buggy do?

"This is suicide," a small voice whimpered. At first Fisk thought it was that of his civilized-self conscience, but it turned out to be Yola's.

Fisk's eyeballs seemed to be locked in their sockets, able to move only marginally to cover the contours of the road. He himself was a machine, his arms levering more or less together, sharing his drastically limited muscular power as though connected by an old-fashioned limited-slip differential.

600 mph . . .

Suddenly the straightaway was ending and he was overhauling the pack at a phenomenal clip. The demon in him exulted.

"You fool—it's the Mountain!" Yola screamed, afraid. But Fisk saw only his beautiful passing of competitors on the fast track. So they had written off Fusion, had they?

Then his foot came up involuntarily. Yola was down beside the pedal, prying it loose. And the pack moved ahead again and crammed like so much floating refuse into the drain-like access to the next hurdle.

"Fusion has merged with the pack." The radio sounded surprised. "Looked for a moment there as if—but the driver was too smart to risk a pass on Mountain. We thought Fusion had mechanical trouble, but obviously not! Sales: Steamco a hundred and one . . . Electro seventy-five, Gasturb fifty-five, Vaporlock forty-four, Fusion thirty-eight . . ."

"Wow!" Yola cried, forgetting her apprehension of the moment before. "You may be crazy, but we're back in the sales money! What's your cut of the gross, Fisk?"

He didn't answer, knowing how little the money meant, compared to the lives depending on it. She had climbed back into Bill's lap and Fisk's foot was free, but now the ascent was too steep to permit high velocity. He trailed the pack at a poor 380 mph.

The course wedged into a two-lane thread, along which cars were spaced like traveling ants. A cliff

developed on the right, the drop-off becoming tall and sheer. A car ahead, tried to pass another precipitously. The banking of the road reversed, throwing it too far out and the vehicle sailed into space to torpedo into the water trap below.

"Coaldust slipped," the radio cried. "Twenty-four cars remain in the race at the two-thirds point . . ."

The demon that now governed Fisk's ailing body took note. A lot of cars would not finish because their drivers were too eager. He had better bide his time until he hit another straightaway.

Meanwhile, Mountain was a terror. Visibility declined as the blind curves became sharper. A small thunderstorm was anchored at the crest, pelting the entries with rain and hailstones. He had to slow to 280 and pace himself by the car ahead through the blasting rain. Then came the descent and Fisk accelerated down the glassy slope.

"Steamco one-twenty-nine . . . Electro one-fourteen . . . Vaporlock sixty-eight . . . Fusion fifty-nine . . ."

Fusion and Fisk were moving up on sales faster than on the pack, perhaps because the spectators knew what would happen on the next level heat, but not fast enough. The demon would settle for nothing less than total victory.

"Oh-oh," Yola said. "Loop's coming next. Cool it, leadfoot."

Bill groaned again. He was showing signs of recovery.

FISK'S eyes were on the desert-like sandflat beyond. Gently rolling dunes were artfully placed to alleviate the monotony and impede progress—a straight-line route would necessarily take in several of them. The alternative was to waste time going around them. He had no idea of what it was like to drive on sand. But if the other cars could handle it, so could Fusion—and this might be its last chance to pass the pack before the finish.

"Steamco still leads going into the Loop," the radio said. "Pack's pretty close and tight, though. There's likely to be some action . . ."

Indeed there was. Fisk observed the Loop, nestled in the angle between the Mountain terminus and the Dunes plain. It seemed to be about three lanes wide—but the pack contained about fifteen cars and few of them were giving way to let the procession become orderly. The Fusion was gaining, but would strike the Loop just after the pack did.

It didn't look as though there were any inherent limit on speed here—the faster he went, the less likely he would be to fall off at the upsidedown apex, provided he had

the car under control. And as long as nothing got in his way. But could his defective body take the strain? The Fusion was willing—the flesh was weak.

The first car hit the Loop. Up and over it went at some five hundred miles per hour, like a toy. Only car lengths behind it came the second, closing. Then, squeezing in two and three abreast, the pack, vying for position even as they encountered the vertical ascent. And the Fusion was bearing down at 550 mph, still accelerating, still gaining.

Steamco shot from the corkscrew exit and landed on the fringe of the sandflat. Dust billowed up momentarily. Electro smacked into this and swerved, stirring up a greater cloud. Then the pack was tearing through like so many piranhas.

Fisk was entering the Loop at 600 mph.

"Hang on!" he yelled, though Yola needed no warning. They smashed into the vertical curve and Fisk's breath left him. This was in effect a ten- or fifteen-G takeoff, he was sure. He clutched at a painful gray awareness.

". . . spectacular crash!" the radio blared avidly and Fisk realized he had failed and could expect nothing but agony before he died. "Pileup just beyond the Loop . . ."

Not me—someone else . . .

He was headed up at 650 mph. The reality that kept him fighting was the climbing needle, signifying conquest.

Yola screamed thinly. They were upside down, plummeting headfirst, leveling, taking off, upside down, proceeding along the awful corkscrew of the Loop. Fisk shoved the pedal all the way to the floor, connecting engine to wheels without any bleeding of power. He rode the descent lane into ever increasing velocity.

670 . . . 685 . . . magic pictures on his retina . . . 700 . . . 715 . . . 730 . . . and they were sailing off the skirt of the Loop. 740 . . . the wheels seemed hardly to touch the sand and only the little vanes kept the car level. 742 . . . 744 . . . acceleration was slower now. The great machine shuddered as though its stress limit had finally been met and all that was left for Yola was a shaken moan.

745 . . . and the needle quivered, seemed to strain. This was ultimate glory!

". . . fire prevents recovery of the bodies . . . total loss . . . worst disaster of the year . . . look at Fusion!"

Dead ahead, half concealed by a low dune and a sinking dust cloud, was the roadblock. Licks of flame shot up and smoke was piling into the sky. No chance to turn. A thou-

sand feet away—and in less than one second they were upon it, traveling at 750 mph, Fisk's foot still savagely mashing the pedal. The Fusion was tearing itself apart and eradication was a microsecond away, but he would not even attempt to ease up. Already he was touching the vane-angle switch.

THE low dune shoved the rubberoid and metal aloft in a single mighty convulsion. The great wheels barely touched the flaming corpse of the nearest car.

And they were airborne as the shaking became almost intolerable. Fumes siphoned in through the stuffed hole as the car was bathed in fire. The speedometer stood at 760. "Great God," Yola screamed in a whisper. "We've cracked the speed of sound!"

"Fusion is past!" the radio gasped. "Fusion hurdled pileup. . ."

The car landed, and sand swirled up behind it in little tornadoes spawned by the vacuum of their passage, but the mighty machine crunched on. The flames were far behind. Fisk's hands and arms were senseless and stiff in a kind of living rigor mortis, but straight ahead was all the car needed in the way of a directive. Now at last his foot began to creep up from the pedal.

"What—what?" a voice mumbled.

"Hey, he's coming to," Yola cried as Bill stirred.

"Keep him quiet," Fisk's voice rasped. "We're still doing six-ninety on sand—"

"Sales," the radio said. "Steamco one-fifty-two . . . Fusion—one moment, it's still changing—that feat of piloting really stirred up the—never saw anything like it. Fusion takes the lead in sales! Fusion one-seventy-three . . . And Steamco—one moment—"

Bill lifted his head. "God, man, that's near my best. What—"

"I had to take over," Fisk said tersely. He was still fighting the rising tide of gray behind his eyes.

"Yeah—but—"

"Revised sales," the radio said. "Fusion two hundred and eight—folks, it's still changing. We can't get a fixed reading. The race isn't even finished . . . Fusion two-forty-nine . . . two-sixty-one—" There was an unexplained pause, then: "Folks, to recap: there has been a fifteen-car collision on the Dunes just beyond the Loop, but the remaining cars are still running. Here's the replay—" Another pause as the screen viewers saw the film. "Steamco retains the lead on the track, but that's all—and Fusion is coming up fast. The others—seven cars, I believe—are picking their way around the

wreckage, avoiding the flames. None of them will finish in the money. It's a two-car race! Fusion, not known for its maneuverability, pulled such an extraordinary feat of—Fusion three hundred and nineteen! Those orders are pouring in! Here's the replay on that hurdle of death. That's Fusion firing out of the Loop—look at that! It cracked mach one! We thought the car was out of the running, then this! The buyers are really impressed. Hell, I'm impressed, and I've been in this business for— Most racers would have been smashed to pieces, busting sound like that, let alone doing it through flame! Fusion three-seventy . . . four hundred . . . Folks we can't keep up. Unprecedented sales for an unfinished race. Looks like a record in the making, even if Fusion doesn't win the Hurdle. Four-fifty-two . . . I gotta buy one myself . . ." The announcer panted into silence.

"That tells it," Bill exclaimed. "Sweetest music I ever heard. And I thought you couldn't drive—"

"I can't," Fisk said. "I'm sicker than you are."

Bill looked at him. "You're white as bones—you have a heart condition? I've lost some blood, but I've taken lumps before—better let me take over. Kid, get down on the floor or somewhere."

Yola scrambled down, finding a place to squat between the bucket seats. Bill threw the switch and Fisk's controls went dead. Now he could relax. These regular racing drivers were almost as tough as their cars.

"What's next?" Bill demanded, angling the car gently around another dune.

"Tunnel," Yola said, wrestling with the map.

"Fusion six hundred and seven . . ."

FISK lay back and let himself slide into whatever oblivion awaited. The demon had left him, but Fisk-normal still needed his medicine. The race's end could not be far off and it did look as though he were planning to survive.

"Fusion seven-twenty-six . . ."

Bill shook his head. "Fisk, I don't know exactly how you did it—but you've just made us rich. Those sales are going to hit a thousand. It's a bandwagon now—everybody in the world will want a Fusion. We'll get a quarter million dollars in commissions—"

"They'll come to their senses and begin canceling after the excitement passes," Fisk pointed out. Now that he could afford to faint, he seemed perversely to be recovering strength.

"Sure—but the cancellations will be made up by other buyers reading

about this in the fax. That always happens. Don't worry—we've got record winnings and the credit's yours. So you took her through mach, did you? I never had the nerve."

"Terrific!" Yola cried, liking the idea of fame.

"Uh—better not," Fisk said, eying the tiny mouth of the approaching tunnel. Bill sounded normal, but Fisk didn't trust the man's condition. He had been unconscious for a fair period and must have lost a significant quantity of blood—and an error in judgment of so much as six inches could be fatal, in that tight passage ahead.

"No, no, Fisk—you did it and you'll get the commission. When I tell the boss how you pulled it out—"

"We'll be rich!" Yola exclaimed with childish avarice.

Fisk hadn't been talking about money. His concern had been to see them through the tunnel alive. Steamco had just entered and at the rate the Fusion was going there would be contact between them inside that darkness. Was Bill intending to vie for position even now?

But it seemed money was a factor, because of the tremendous sales spurred by his mad exploit of moments ago. Yola's greed and Bill's misunderstanding sent a negative ripple through the weary convolutions of his brain. "When you tell your boss that he'll fire you for allowing an unqualified driver to take over and play roulette with machinery and people's lives in the Hurdle. Because you knew about me and he didn't. It was blind luck that got us through—as the tapes of the race will show."

Bill slid the car into the Tunnel as though he had done it all his life—as perhaps he had. "Maybe so," he said soberly. "But luck doesn't usually operate that way—not on the El or the Mountain—and especially not in getting up speed to hurdle wreckage. There was driving genius in your hands and feet, like it or not. But you're right—it's bad business and my boss would rather not know. Okay—we'll split the take, half and half. It's right to share, because I got hurt and you—"

AS THE Tunnel closed about them the rag-and-strap plug popped out of the hole in the bubble, urged by the suddenly compressing air within the confined space. An almost solid blast of atmosphere rammed in, striking Bill in the face and making a stormlike turbulence within the bubble. The car swerved, partly because Bill could barely see in the

gale, but mostly, Fisk knew, because of the drag of the aperture itself. There was no room to compensate here. The stony walls were inches away.

But Yola knew what to do and since no one had *told* her to do it, she did it. She crawled across Bill's lap, probably kneeing him painfully in the process, fetched in the tattered wad and jammed it back into the hole. The storm subsided.

Fisk was able to speak again. "You were hurt because my daughter ran out in front of us while you were going through Hairpin. She almost killed us all."

"Take the money—take the money!" Yola cried.

"You sure are one for making objections," Bill said ruefully. "What *do* you want?"

"I think we'd better just walk out of your life when the race is over. A good—"

He had to pause, for they had caught up with Steamco. The Tunnel was lighted, but irregularly—the width varied from one to three lanes with curves thrown in. Passing could be tricky—and Steamco had no intention of being passed.

"A good sales day is the least we can do to repay—"

But Fisk had to stop again as Bill swerved to pass on a subterranean straightaway and was quickly blocked off. Steamco had to know that there was no car to beat but Fusion—all the drivers would have been hearing the radio reports. The only way Steamco could recoup was by finishing ahead—or by putting Fusion out of the race entirely.

The passage narrowed, halting the maneuvering for the moment.

"—the trouble we have caused you," Fisk continued. "I'll find another job."

"Fisk, shut up," Yola said. "You're throwing away a quarter million dollars."

"Fusion nine hundred and eighty-one sales . . ."

"Look, Fisk," Bill said earnestly as the dark walls rushed past and trickles of wind whined in through the stuffed hole. "I told you I'd cover for you about your lack of experience, laughable as that seems now. You've had experience somewhere—somehow—even if you don't remember it. You're covering for me, really. And I'd never make trouble for your little girl. You don't have to sign over the money for that. I want you to have your share because you earned it. I wouldn't feel right letting you go away with nothing after the way you—"

"I wouldn't feel right taking it," Fisk said firmly. "You were right—any idiot can drive this car and one just did—"

"Fisk," Yola said, "if you don't

take that money, I'm going to—"

The dark track opened into a dual lane, then into a broad cavern spiked with stalagmites casting multiple and deceptive shadows. Many trails seemed to be open. Bill goosed the Fusion and angled for the far right opening. The Steamco moved over to block him, staying just ahead so that passing was impossible.

"I'll take the commission myself and make out a check for you," Bill said, as though nothing special were going on. "I'll take all the credit for the race, if that's the way you want it—but you've got to have your share of the commission. I can't take all the money for a race I didn't drive."

"I don't want it," Fisk said.

Bill tried to pass again. The maneuver was impressive at 400 mph in the partially lighted cavern. But Steamco was ready and stayed ahead.

"Fusion one thousand and thirty-eight . . ."

"I'll give it to your daughter, then," Bill said. "An irrevocable trust for her education, so she doesn't have to run onto any more racetracks."

"Yeah, yeah!" Yola agreed, but with less enthusiasm.

Fisk shook his head. "That money should go to your injured partner."

Another dangerous dodge that nearly put both cars into a post. "Twenty-five per cent to your little girl, then." Bill looked grim. "A hundred grand will cover my friend's bill. You're making me settle for twice that. I don't like profiteering on something like this. I'm hurting in my conscience worse than on my head and I can't dicker with you any more. That's my final offer."

"Flip for it," Yola said. "You go left next split—last moment. If Steamco goes right, you pass and Fisk takes the share."

"Okay."

Fisk was about to demur again, when the radio interrupted: "Folks, you'll be glad to know the drivers survived Duperjet's crash. They blame themselves for misjudgment—too much speed in the Slalom . . ."

Fisk felt a tremendous relief.

Bill accelerated again, almost touching Steamco's persistent tail. As the post zoomed in on them, the first of a line of them, he nudged right, then cut sharply left. Steamco was caught on the right side, too late to compensate without cracking into the pylon.

"WHAT'S the matter with you?" Yola demanded as she and Fisk stepped out of the tube at his apartment building.

"We need money and you know it. Why wouldn't you take your share?"

Fisk himself hardly understood his reasons. "What I did wasn't real. Some demon in me wanted the glory of winning the Hurdle, no matter what the cost. I was too sick to control it—"

"That's right. You looked like a corpse. I thought sure you meant to kill us."

"But once the pressure was off I regained control. By then it was too late to undo the damage—"

"But you're the one who brought off the win."

"The demon brought if off. But at least I didn't have to give that demon the satisfaction of making a profit from the episode. With no credit and no money—"

"Except that trust Bill's setting up for me that nobody can touch," she said. "Fisk, that money would have bought a lot of fun for both of us and now all it's good for is education. Ugh!"

"Precisely. Education abolishes demons."

"I just don't get it," she said crossly.

"Neither do I," Fisk admitted. "I just knew that neither the racing credit nor the money was rightfully mine.

"I will earn my fortune in my own way or not at all. That's my particular hurdle. Maybe it's a question of whether Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde will govern."

"Who?"

He sighed. "Never mind. It's a devious point of characterization—and perhaps illusory. But disaster strikes every time I compromise my principles. I tried to make an illicit profit in Marsland speculation and lost everything. I got involved in black market adoption and almost landed in jail. This time I very nearly killed us all. The demon offers material riches, but his real goal is misery."

She uttered the expletive he still didn't understand. "The first time you got a new, exciting life. The second time you got me. This time you could have had—"

"At any rate—I'll never go near another racing car as long as I—"

"Hey, what's this?" she cried, lifting something out of the package slot of the apartment door."

Fisk looked at what she had found. It was a small square item with a gift tag.

Yola read it aloud. "'You're a great sport. Sink Bill.' "

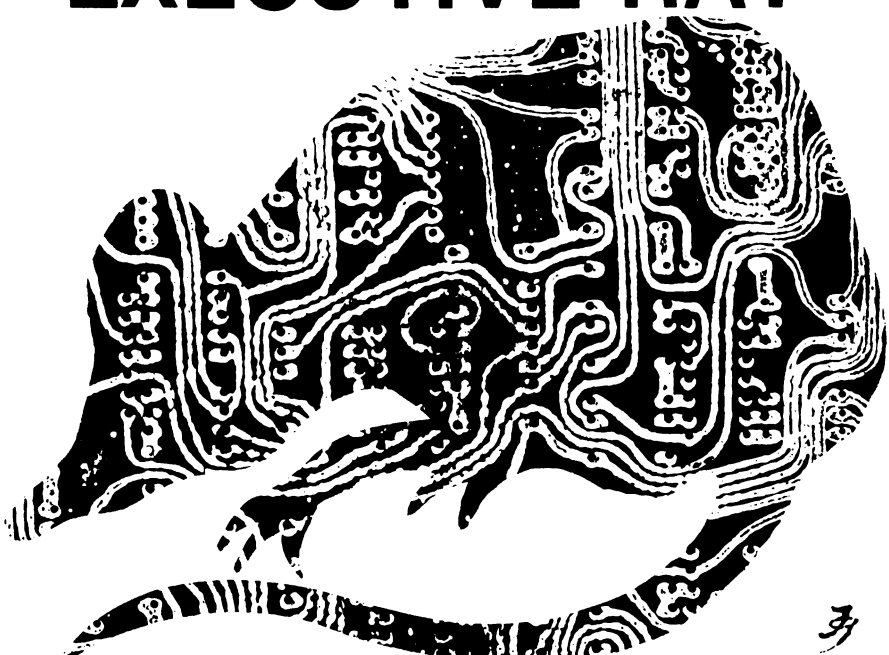
"That's 'Sinc.,' not 'sink,' " Fisk said. "For 'Sincerely.' " But she was already tearing open the wrapping with juvenile impatience.

Inside was the personalized ID ownership key for a new Fusion Special. ●

Research can be painful. In fact, at times it's downright sickening!

LARRY EISENBERG

THE EXECUTIVE RAT



WHEN Dr. Fahy came into my office I was genuinely pleased to see him. His reputation in behavioral studies was international and I had been secretly hoping that he would ask me to design instrumentation to carry out his new series of experiments. Doctor Fahy was in his early sixties, a tall thin man with a rather dour expression. He spoke with a minimum of words and the only time he smiled was when he learned that his grant would not be charged for my engineering time.

"As a recent arrival at the university," he said, "I'm quite overwhelmed by the many free services."

"The parts and construction time are charged," I pointed out.

"Naturally," said Dr. Fahy.

His pale blue eyes wandered about my office and fixed upon the double row of filing cabinets.

"You have a kind of executive responsibility, haven't you?"

I nodded.

"I'm the sole engineer of the electronics laboratory but I do have two technicians working for me. With all due modesty, let me point out that I've designed everything from a simple stimulator for monkey testicles, to special purpose minicomputers."

Dr. Fahy did not seem overly impressed.

"That's fine," he said dryly. "Then you should have no difficulty meeting my needs. I've typed out a set of specifications which I will leave in your care. Within a week's time, I should like a cost estimate and a projected date of delivery."

I accepted the three pages of specifications with some disappointment. He seemed to sense my distress.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

I sighed.

"The standard working practice here is for the researcher to outline for me what he intends to do. I have some familiarity with the ongoing research. Knowing exactly what is supposed to happen enables me to design a better and more apt instrument."

He nodded.

"That certainly sounds reasonable," said Dr. Fahy. "Nevertheless, I don't work that way. You build me what I've asked for and I'll assume all responsibility for the end result."

I was annoyed at his brusqueness but I concealed my anger.

"As you wish," I said.

IT WAS clear from a study of the specifications that Doctor Fahy wanted an animal shocker of extraordinary potential. He was asking

for a ten-thousand volt source capable of delivering up to ten milliamperes of current. Once chosen, the current setting was to remain stable to within a tiny fraction of a per cent despite wide variations in the resistance of whatever it was he intended to shock. An accurate printout of the value of the shocking current was required as well as a complex logic facility to program the sequencing and timing of the shocks. There were to be remote and local controls. But most disconcerting were the extraordinary tolerances that were asked for. Clearly this design would require utterly new techniques.

I was still quite annoyed at Dr. Fahy's reticence. If he had told me what he intended to do I might have been able to point out where some of the specifications might be relaxed.

I decided to go first to the library and read up on his past experiments. I had no difficulty in locating his work. The experimental journals of psychology were filled with them. Generally his procedure was to shock experimental rats in the region of the tail and at the same time submit them to trying sets of circumstances. In his "executive rat" experiment, he found that animals who could not turn off the shock source right after it had been turned on, developed a severe kind of stomach ulcer.

In some cases, he would warn the rat by a tone that the shock was about to come. In other cases, he provided them with a series of tones which terminated just before the shock began. But in every case, he gave the animals tasks to perform despite the approaching shocks.

My greatest disappointment came in discovering that nowhere did he describe his experimental apparatus, save in general terms. He did not specify the accuracies of his readings and his results were summarized only in statistical terms. I went back to my office and set about a preliminary design to meet the specifications. When I had finished I called in Dr. Fahy and showed him the results. He became quite angry.

"Four thousand dollars to build?" he cried. "That's outrageous!"

I attempted to soothe his anger.

"If only you would relax your specifications," I began.

"He snorted. "Nonsense.This apparatus is virtually the same as the one I had at Bradman Tech. The engineer there had no difficulty in building it for half the amount. I don't like to question your competence, but perhaps you'd like me to get his design?"

"There's no need for that," I snapped. "I don't need someone else's design. But the cost of the parts and labor cannot be reduced."

He shrugged.

"If I must, I must," he said. "When can I have it?"

"It will take about a month to get the parts and a month to build the entire unit. Then a week or two to check it out. However, there are other people ahead of you."

He waved his hands impatiently.

"I can't wait my turn," said Dr. Fahy. "If you want a letter from the university president authorizing you to give me priority I'll get it for you. I have a new grant proposal to write in five months. I must have fresh data long before then."

At that point I made my first great error.

"I'll give you first priority," I said.

BY VIRTUE of nights and Saturdays of unstinting work I managed to deliver this very complex system within two months' time. He accepted it matter-of-factly and without even perfunctory thanks. After two days of trial, Dr. Fahy called me on the phone and indicated that except for minor bugs everything seemed in order.

He then dropped his bombshell.

"I shall require four copies of the prototype system," he said. "And I must have them as soon as possible. I have four technicians drawing salary here and they'll have nothing to do until you supply me with these additional units."

"We're not set up for production," I said. "We do have other jobs to do."

"That's not my concern," he said. "If you require authorization for additional technicians I'll get it for you."

Two days later the authorization to hire two additional technicians came through from the university president's office. But there was no provision for additional bench space. Thereafter I spent two frustrating weeks interviewing job prospects before I found two men who seemed even marginally to meet the job requirements.

I asked Dr. Fahy, in the interests of speedy output, to let me borrow the prototype for use as a model but he refused.

"The unit is in constant use and can't be spared," he said.

I had to work very closely with my new technicians and provide them with detailed mechanical drawings of each section, particularly demonstrating the way all parts had to be mounted. Weeks went by with Dr. Fahy constantly

calling me and complaining about the delay. I was in the process of checking out unit Number Two, when Dr. Fahy called again.

"Unit One just quit in the middle of an experiment. Can you come right over?"

I went. The power light on the panel of the controller was off. I checked the fuse—it was okay. After an hour of fussing around I disconnected the controller and took it back to my laboratory. Two hours later I found a poorly soldered connection. When it had been resoldered, I returned the controller. Dr. Fahy set his dials for a test run. His panel lights indicated an incorrect sequence of shocks.

"It's been acting up this way lately," said Dr. Fahy.

I was astonished.

"I wish you'd told me before. That should never happen."

He was annoyed when I insisted on taking the controller back once again. This time it took a day of probing to find that one of my integrated circuit chips was failing on an intermittent basis. I replaced the chip and to my shocked surprise, there was no improvement.

Dr. Fahy came by at this time.

"My experiments are stopped cold," he said. "Why don't you let me try Unit Two?"

"You can," I said reluctantly. "But I haven't really completed all my checkout tests."

"I'll take my chances," he said.

THE third unit came to my bench a week later but I still hadn't found the trouble with Unit One. And then I discovered a diode had been wired in backward. I was both elated and annoyed.

"I'll be damned," I cried. "How the hell did this unit ever work?"

I delivered it to Dr. Fahy the following day. He seemed relieved.

"The printouts of this second unit are unreliable," he said.

I took Unit Two back.

Unit Four was ready when I finally repaired Unit Two and then I discovered Unit One back on my bench with a note from Dr. Fahy stating that it had become unreliable again. The symptoms of Unit One were the most baffling I had ever encountered. It would function perfectly on my bench and then misbehave in Dr. Fahy's lab.

"Are your assistants reporting the symptoms correctly?" I asked.

"My assistants do not touch any of the controls. I am the only one to do so," he said.

I shook my head in puzzlement as he added a few biting sarcasms.

I had taken to waking in the middle of the night with hunger pains that were allayed only by lots of milk and cookies. Sometimes they even occurred between meals during the day and I began to keep snacks on hand in my laboratory. My weight began to go up, despite the fact that I had begun to come in on Sundays in an attempt to catch up on my backlog.

Dr. Fahy saw me nibbling cookies and sipping milk one day.

"It's not a good idea to cram in so many sweets," he said.

I was flattered by his interest. It was the first time he had seemed to take personal note of my habits. I told him of my continual hunger. He became alive with attention.

"When did it start," he asked. "How frequently do you get these hunger pains?"

I told him.

"Have you had a physical recently?"

"About six months ago," I said. "Everything was perfect."

"If I'm right," he said, "you've got a peptic ulcer."

He insisted on taking a full history of my symptoms before sending me off to the specialist associated with the university who confirmed the diagnosis. He put me on a diet of milk and antacids.

"Are you under particular stresses?" he asked sympathetically.

"For the time being, yes."

"They won't help your ulcer. You need a long rest from your work."

I sighed.

"I don't see how."

BUT a small amount of relief appeared on the horizon. The annual engineering show had come to town and despite my work load, I decided to attend. With a great deal of guilt, I went to a talk given by a man named Holcomb, an engineer from Bradman Tech, Dr. Fahy's former bailiwick. Afterward I went up to chat with Holcomb.

"Did you know Dr. Fahy?" I asked.

He smiled.

"Very well," he said. "He's a difficult man to please. Fortunately I never did any instrumentation for him."

"Who did?" I asked.

He seemed puzzled.

"Did what?"

"Built his previous instrumentation at Bradman Tech." I told him of the troubles I had run into. He shook his head.

"Beats the hell out of me," he said. "I never built anything for Fahy. He's a trained engineer. He got his bachelor's degree in elec-

tronics before he got his doctorate in psychology."

"Then you have no idea who designed and built his shockers?"

"He probably made them himself," said Holcomb. "At the time I was annoyed because he didn't use me."

"I wish I had been that lucky," I said.

But now I began to wonder what was going on. That night I went back to my office and pondered the situation. Dr. Fahy had been quite clear in asserting that his equipment had been designed for him at Bradman Tech. He had been lying to me.

I walked over to his laboratory in the Hanley Building. It was after nine in the evening and the doors were locked. I used my duplicate keys and went inside the deserted rooms. All of the equipment, including three of my malfunctioning programers, had been turned off. I meticulously checked his interconnecting cables and found three sets running off somewhere. I followed them and found that they ran to a remote room where presumably Dr. Fahy could operate electronic gear including a programable patch board.

I had never seen any of this equipment before.

I turned it on and checked the function of all the controls. I then went back into the main laboratory and turned on the equipment I had designed. It was almost one in the morning before I finished my investigation.

I slept poorly that night and spent quite a bit of time at the refrigerator, allaying my hunger pains. In the morning I went to see Dr. Fahy. He seemed annoyed at the interruption.

"I must talk to you," I said. "I believe I've found the source of our electronic instability."

He smiled.

"Have you really?"

"It's in your remote logic control system," I said. "The one that you designed and patched into my units."

He nodded.

"I suppose you want an explanation," he said.

"To put it mildly."

"I've always worked with rats," said Dr. Fahy. "Generally speaking, they develop ulcers for two reasons. One is the situation where they are given shocks unless they solve an unsolvable problem. The other involves solving an infinite number of solvable problems."

"It seems I got an infinite number of insolvable problems," I said.

"That was nasty, wasn't it," said Dr. Fahy. "But you see, working with rats is one thing. Extrapolat-

ing to humans is quite another."

"So you chose me. And I did develop the expected gastric ulcer."

"You're angry and I don't blame you," said Fahy. "But there was a scientific problem of the greatest moment at stake. I became obsessed with knowing the answer. Can you understand that?"

"How do you think the faculty council will react when I report what you've done?"

"You won't do that," said Dr. Fahy. "For one thing, you can't prove your case. I'll deny everything."

"Even this conversation?"

"Even that. But you have an alternative choice. If you agree to sign a waiver of claims against me, I'll publish our data. It will rock the scientific world and give you immortality."

"No doubt," I said dryly. "But who would publish this caricature of science?"

"I'm editor of a psychology journal. I'll put it through myself. There will be a storm afterward but I'll take my chances with that. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experiment that has never been done before."

"You could have gotten volunteers."

"Could I? If the subject had prior knowledge, it would have vitiated all the results, wouldn't it?" Fahy was gloating.

"I'll think it over," I said.

I WAS sitting in my office, a week later, when the terrible news broke. There had been a dreadful accident in the Fahy laboratory. One of the shockers had failed to operate. Dr. Fahy had opened the cage that should have turned off the high voltage through an interlock. In some inexplicable way he had received a ten-thousand-volt jolt across the chest. After intensive first-aid he had finally come around.

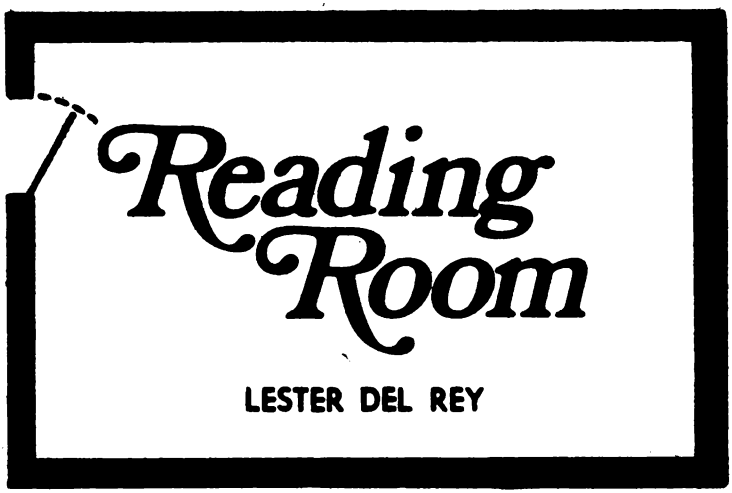
As I arrived, he was being carried out of the laboratory on a stretcher. One of his young assistants was in tears.

"How is he?" I asked her.

"He'll live—but he's a very sick man," she said.

After she had gone, I examined the cage where the accident had occured. I turned off the power at the main panel and went directly to the interlock. It took but a few seconds to remove the override wire I had inserted the night before and restore the interlock circuit to its normal state. Then I set off to my office to write a report about the mechanical failure of the interlock to the shocker.

That night, for the first time in many months, I slept through without a single hunger pain. ●



BOOKS REVIEWED

SPACE SKIMMER
David Gerrold

YESTERDAY'S CHILDREN
David Gerrold

WHEN HARLIE WAS ONE
David Gerrold

THE OUTPOSTER
Gordon R. Dickson

THE GOLD AT THE STARBOW'S END
Frederik Pohl

CLOAK OF AESIR
John W. Campbell

THE TIME STREAM
John Taine

CYBERNETICS
F. H. George

ELECTRONICS
W. P. Jolly

I'M TOLD that a good reviewer is a monstrously clever man who doesn't like anything and whose job is to delight his readers by sharing his cynicism with them, while disliking them beyond all else. The above may apply to many fields of reviewing, but I've never believed it applied to reviews of science-fiction books. I feel it more important to cover the books that should be read than to warn people from the bad ones—and I'm always delighted when I have a list of good works. It may not give me as many chances to show off my own brilliance, but it serves the readers.

Dealing with books I like presents problems, of course. For one thing, I'm farther out on a thinner limb—enumerating the ways in which a novel can fail is not difficult and involves hardly any risk

at all. But the lack of these faults does not necessarily make a good book. Even technical writing excellence can do no more than make a barely acceptable one. Some of the newer writers show more technical excellence than we've had in the field before, yet I find their adaptations of the avant-garde themes from *Story* magazine of the early thirties boring, no matter how well done.

The elements in a story that usually please me most seem to lie in the writer himself. He must have a wide range of interests and enthusiasms. These should include a liking for and knowledge of the scientific aspects of our civilization as well as human and cultural developments. He must enjoy playing with a variety of future possibilities. He must have a real and varied interest in science fiction for itself. And he must enjoy writing and watching his plots and characters develop, just as he would enjoy seeing another writer's story develop while reading it. It isn't enough to like being a writer or winning approval from a clique—he must find enough pleasure in writing science fiction to put every bit of himself into it for his own approval. If you can get all that together you've got an author of merit.

I think we've been lucky enough to add such a writer to the field recently. David Gerrold has had four novels published within the last year or less, the first being a collaboration with Larry Niven which had serious faults, but also many strong virtues. (*The Flying Sorcerers,* previously reported here.) The others are solo flights and they look very promising in sum.

His *Space Skimmer* (Ballantine, 95¢) is apparently the first of a series, from what I've been told. Incidentally, the gadget on the cover looks like some artist's attempt at symbolism but is actually a very good depiction of the ship in the story—something of an ultimate dream of spaceships, around which the plot develops. A thousand years before the story begins, the Empire of the Galaxy had extended itself beyond its ability to communicate and was falling to pieces. The skimmers were created to solve the problems, but they went out and were never heard from again. The Empire fell and each component of it evolved its own culture and life style or form. As the story develops a barbarian who must flee his miserable world discovers a skimmer and takes off in it. But he understands its operation so poorly that he has to seek assistance. Each new addition to the crew provides new problems, and each introduces new cultures and more mysteries about the problems that wrecked the Em-

pire. The plot is a little thin—probably because this story basically sets up the situation for others to come. But the characters are good—their interrelationships provide interest and tension and the ship grows to be a major character in the story. I for one will be interested in seeing more of the adventures. The book gets a qualified recommendation as the beginning of what may be an excellent series.

GERROLD'S novel *Yesterday's Children* (Dell, 95¢) has nothing to do with wonderchildren. The characters are adults, but true children of the impersonal nature of war's evolution into the future. All the action takes place aboard a long-out-of-date destroyer, manned by people assigned to the ship because of their failure to merit better positions. Its Captain, Brandt, is a man who has given up responsibility. First Officer Korie is either a madman with an obsession to fight or a genius at doing the impossible. The two officers are totally opposed and the crew is caught in the middle. The story begins in the course of a chase after an enemy ship—it ends with the resolution of the chase. And the enemy (the "bogie") throughout is only a light on the screens—and the war is simply a development of centuries of war.

The characterization and conflict of characters are excellent. The tension mounts steadily as the characters evolve. The technical details of the ship and its method of extralight travel are developed fully and credibly. (There's no reason for the awkward present-tense style, but it ceases to bother after a while).

The only real flaw is unfortunately major. The ending, while well prepared, is not an adequate resolution.

The whole story has centered on the character of Korie. The ending seems to push the resolution of that character aside, as if the reader were not involved with him. (And nothing could be less true.) If the rest of the novel hadn't been excellent, this might have been acceptable. As it is, Gerrold has written a damned good book that becomes unsatisfactory only in the last two or three pages.

It does, however, prove the ability of Gerrold to handle backgrounds, character, technical details and almost every aspect of the science-fiction novel with passion and with marvelous inventiveness.

IT IS in his *When Harlie Was One* (Ballantine, $1.25) that Gerrold proves what a fine science-fiction writer he can be. This is a first-rate novel. Much of it was

published in stories appearing in *Galaxy Magazine*, but this book is not a collection of novelettes—Gerrold has written this version as a true, continuous novel, with a considerable development.

The story centers on a computer, Harlie, who was designed to be as human as possible. He's one year old when the story opens. He is under the tutelage of a psychologist, David Auberson. And he's in danger, because the company that built him is under new management and determined to scrap him if he can't prove he is financially valuable. Harlie faces immininent death. What does he do? He is an adult in intelligence, but immature. So he overloads his inputs by feedback and goes on a "trip." He writes kooky verse. And he gets on a binge of discussions about the nature of God and of human love, etc. When pressed for proof of his value he comes up with a demand for more funds to build a G.O.D. machine to make him omniscient. By now there's a question of his sanity as well of his value—and even his father-figure psychologist can't be sure of the answer.

The characters and their evolution in the story could not have been better handled. Harlie advances from precocious immaturity to a true person—one both fully human and fully robotic. Gradually we see and believe as he transfers to being the consulting psychologist for Auberson in his troubles with the love affair that is the sub-plot of the novel. The long discussions on religion and love are done so well and with such a lack of the obvious or banal that they are as interesting as any plot development—and so integrated that they *are* plot development. The technical background of Harlie is handled convincingly and with an inventiveness that makes it a major part of the problem and resolution. And the ending of the story isn't a simple solution to the immediate problem, but an extension and deepening of all that has gone before. It's a clever book—and a darned good one.

The novel is being issued in hardcover as a Science Fiction Book Club selection. Let me recommend that every member choose it. It's one of the best novels of the year.

GORDON R. DICKSON showed himself top-flight many years ago and has gone right on doing so. For further evidence, see his *The Outposter* (Lippincott, $5.95). Here is another of the novels in which Dickson takes on a young man who has come to a realization of the True Facts before anyone else in the culture knows what is

developing. This book bears no direct relation to Dickson's famous Dorsai series, but the connection must be made by the reader, nevertheless. The novel takes place at an early stage of Earth's colonization of the stars. The problem is to make the colony worlds self-supporting and then to somehow resist the encroachment of aliens—closely related problems. Added to all is the fact that Earth has let itself become a mess and now must ship out much of its population—but it can't afford to support or defend its outcasts.

I didn't find this novel quite as good as the best of the Dorsai series, but that may be due to the fact that—as a professional writer who gets involved in the method of other writers—I am becoming too familair with the way Dickson handles this type of idea. Nevertheless, Dickson's deep interest in the way the past must affect the future and his always ingenious handling of the sociology of aliens combine to make it a very good novel. His exploration of the value of outcasts from one culture when exposed to a different one gives this novel something not to be found in similar degree in the Dorsai books. I recommend it highly.

FREDERIK POHL is another of our old masters and a surprising one in his collection, *The Gold at the Starbow's End* (Ballantine, $1.25). The three short stories are excellent examples of the type of fiction we expect from him, one of which I was happy to be able to buy from him for *Worlds of Fantasy*. There are also two very long novelettes—and here is where the surprise comes in. Both were published in 1972, so they are quite recent. Both are good. And both represent Pohl as most readers do not expect him to be.

Most of the readers of this magazine must have read *The Merchants of Venus Underground*. This is straight adventure fiction in its best form. It takes the modern beliefs in what Venus is like—which make fiction seem hopeless on a planet so inhospitable to life—and gives us a realistic colony struggling at the edge of failure. Pohl then puts forward as hero the type of man who might survive there and builds a convincing story out of the conflicting interests of the hero and a tourist who hires him to explore the traces of a mysterious other race. Good from start to excellent finish.

The Gold at the Starbow's End is a story I will not try to summarize. When I finished reading it, I called up Pohl to tell him it was the best novelette I'd read for several years—and I was completely

sincere. It should win a Hugo and a Nebula award—it deserves all honors.

It's a hard story to pin down, using some surprising extensions into the future from Pohl's interest in such things as number theory and mental development. It's very much Pohl at his best. And yet, somehow, the whole thing seems like a new and unexpected development in Pohl's writing career. The story is basically in the grand tradition of romance and human supremacy from the good old days, yet it mixes its vision with the bitter truth from modern science fiction. The novelette seems to have taken the so-called new wave and old wave, combined the best of both and come up with something uniquely its own self.

The collection is Pohl at his top form, better than his previous ones. I can't recommend it too highly.

ANOTHER collection is a must, but this one comes from more than a generation ago. John W. Campbell's *Cloak of Aesir* (Lancer, 95¢, is back in print after far too many years. (This was originally issued in a small hardcover edition by Shasta Publishers, but never previously in softcover form.) Seven of the "Don A. Stuart" stories are here, including the two stories of Aesir and the matchless tale of the ultimate destiny of Man—*Forgetfulness.* It's very good to have these stories available again—and good to know that a great deal more of Campbell's fiction will soon be republished.

In our field, anything from the early 'thirties seems almost prehistoric. While most of the Don A. Stuart fiction will stand the test of so much time, very few other stories from that distant past will endure so well. We've learned a great deal in forty years and we've constantly redefined science fiction as it has evolved.

UNDER the pseudonym of John Taine, Eric Temple Bell took up science fiction as a pure

avocation, or hobby. He was a distinguished mathematician, but his fiction dealt more with the emotional impact of science and the future than with science for itself. And for years one of his novels has been considered a classic. I read *The Time Stream* (currently available from Dover Publications at $1.75) out of order and over a period of years as I could find the old magazines from 1931 and 1932. I could recognize its merits but was left with some loose ends—natural under the conditions of my reading. Now I've had a chance to read the story in one sitting.

I know now why it was considered a classic. It was a pioneering work dealing with variable time (though this is still confusing)—and the emotional quality deriving from its sweeping concept was new and fresh when it was first published. The book deals with a nearly perfect society in the future (or past, since time here is circular) and present-day men who dip into the time stream to be swept into that society. But men of that "future" are also dipping into the time stream and going to the far past, tracing their own doom and the cyclic doom of all societies between. And, unfortunately, in Eos, which is the Eden of the future, there are the snake and the apple.

The book still is not entirely clear and much of its luster seems to have faded with time and changing qualities of writing. There are no real characters and the motivations are often cloudy and unreal. Yet there is a fascination to *The Time Stream*. I think the volume is well worth the price, particularly since Dover has done its usual splendid job of printing and binding and has also included four of the original Frank R. Paul illustrations, very well reproduced.

Dover Publications (180 Varick Street, New York, N.Y. 10014) offer a large selection of science-fiction and adventure classics that are always good buys. I would recommend that any serious reader write for their free list. Most bookstores carry only a few.

Incidentally, Dover also sells a series of "Teach Yourself" Books. I've seen two of these, both priced at $2.50: *Cybernetics*, by F. H. George; and *Electronics*, by W. P. Jolly. I have no intention of reviewing self-help books, but these are too good to pass up. They won't make a professional scientist out of anyone, but they will give the simplest and most accurate introduction to an understanding of their subjects I've seen. They also have lucid, modern diagrams—something sadly lacking in many books—and are worth more than the price asked for them. ●

EMPTY EDEN

The earth creature brought truth to these symbiotic aliens. Yet life and love depended on a lie!

DORIS PISERCHIA

THE laboratory was roomy and equipped to the ceiling and I hated every antiseptic inch of it, especially the inches comprising the cage. I was in the cage and the only thing I had with me was a boot. It should have been a gun because that was what I had made a grab for after my hasty rush through the water toward the beach a short time ago.

"Hey, dumdum," I called. The cage had no bars—it was simply a big box with walls made of strong metal screen. I banged on the screen by the door and called again.

My kidnaper was about twenty feet away and as busy as could be with a batch of chemicals and test tubes. He was big, blond, naked, beautiful and one-hundred-per cent insane. Every time he looked at me he went blind. Each time I said something to him he went deaf. And that made no sense for he seemed to be able to see and hear normally otherwise.

I gave the door a kick and he cast a glance my way and chuckled. Plainly he knew that he had something in the cage and his senses had been alert enough for him to snatch me off the beach and carry me here. That much I could understand.

He must have had a brainstorm because he rushed out of the lab and came back a few minutes later with a handful of weeds. There was a four-inch space at the bottom of the cage and he shoved the weeds under it and grinned at me. Evidently I was supposed to have lunch now.

I tried to kick the weeds at him but he turned too quickly and sped back to his test tubes. "Which culture?" he said and picked up a vial and examined it. What amazed me was that I understood everything he said. His speech was similar to ancient Chinese and I was a language expert.

"Hey, dumdum," I called. "Come and let me out. I'm no animal—I'm a girl. You know what a girl is."

He didn't turn around, so busy was he preparing that culture. I slammed the screen with the flat of my hand and after a while he came over and looked in at me. For some reason he went blind again. Poking his nose against the mesh, he squinted and blinked.

"I don't understand how I could have missed something as big as you," he said. "Where have you been hiding? I could have sworn there wasn't another large animal for miles and miles."

I slammed the screen where his nose touched it and he jumped back. "Let me out," I yelled.

He stood a short distance away

and squinted at me out of big sad eyes. "I'll do it painlessly. And I'll try not to kill you, but I can't promise anything."

HE WENT back to his puttering and I paced the cage for several minutes. I put on the boot and tried to kick a hole in the screen. It was then that I noticed the watch on my wrist. I wasn't naked after all. Tying the piece of wire to the band, I dangled the watch outside the cage and swung it like a pendulum. All of a sudden the wire knot loosened and the watch fell on the floor about three yards away.

Dumdum stepped on it when he came to visit me again. He said, "Ouch," and picked off the watch that stuck to his sole. He held it a fraction of an inch away from his eyes, blinked at it a few times and then threw it away. He came on over to the cage and looked at me. His eyes grew bleary and I knew that this time it wasn't only from blindness. He was feeling sorry because of what he was going to do to me.

"This thing in the cage isn't a guinea pig," I said. "You carried me from the lake, remember? I had two arms and legs, I was soft and cuddly and I stank. Damn you to hell, what's wrong with you?"

"I have a feeling," he said. "This time it will work. You're going to give it all back to me. I'll have Radena again."

"I don't know what that is but I hope it rots," I said and, leaping to the sidescreen, I kicked at the same spot I had kicked before. The wire began to give. I waited until he went away and then I unwound wires around the weak spot in the screen and kicked like crazy. A hole began to appear and I kept kicking until it was big enough to crawl through.

Scrambling past the mad scientist, I got out of the building and ran around a corner and fell headlong into a cemetery. It took me a few seconds to realize what the place was. This was where he buried his guinea pigs after he murdered them. He had made a stone for each one and there must have been hundreds of them in the long narrow rows.

Behind me he said, "You must have teeth like razors the way you bit through that screen."

"I'm not an animal," I told him at the top of my lungs. "I'm too bright to be an animal. I know what this place is—it's where you put what you don't need anymore. Here, I'll show you." Digging like a fiend, I made a hole in the ground after which I hauled off the boot and buried it.

"I see you're a carnivore." He kneeled and dug up the boot and gave it back to me. "You can't hide your bone here. This is sacred ground."

He picked me up and took me to the cage and I sat in a corner and watched while he repaired the hole in the screen.

"You're a smart little beast," he said. "You chose the weakest spot in this wall."

I didn't want to savor the sight of him. But he was so damned beautiful. His back was big and smooth and I stared at it with a mixed kind of hunger. Then I saw something move on it and I stared more intently. All at once I recoiled.

Quietly crawling to the screen I looked at his back. The skin rippled. I began to move away from him. Beautiful he might be, but he was untouchable. He was wearing a festoon.

Half a mile from this lab was a pretty little lake with a patch of trees bordering one side of it. Hidden in the trees was a fancy space cruiser that should have put down in the New York port on Earth twenty hours ago. Landing on an uninhabited planet for no other reason than to take a bath in a lake was something only an idiot or a spoiled brat would do. I'd been called spoiled plenty of times. My name was Raven Pek and my father had too much money. He bought me anything I wanted but he didn't teach me how to be satisfied with myself. All I did was roam around in my little ship, looking for something to do.

My clothes were on the beach by the lake. The supposedly uninhabited planet had at least one person on it and that person had plucked me out of the water and made me his prisoner.

As for the festoon—it was only a tale. A festoon was a parasite that lived somewhere in the Vigil Cluster.

It was said to be immortal and it lived inside a host. It didn't harm the wearer, in fact a symbiotic relationship was established that was beneficial to both. The festoon nourished itself on the host's spare energy and the host enjoyed good health.

The story was a myth and everybody knew it. I knew it. But my kidnaper was wearing something translucent, something that rippled like water and it couldn't be a natural part of his body. Nor could it be a myth.

MY brooding was interrupted when the cage door swung open and the mad chemist walked in to look down at me.

"No," I yelled and tried to get away.

He picked me up, carried me out and put me down on one of the slabs. Then he picked up a hypodermic.

I don't know what made me decide to pray. I used to like religion when I was little, but I hadn't thought about God in years. Anyhow, I rose to my knees, made a steeple of my hands and began saying goodbye to everything. This man was mad and I doubted my chances of surviving after he injected me with his alien solution.

I didn't see his first reaction. I was certain that his vision cleared. Whatever it was that had been making him partially blind must have lost its control over him for a few moments. This was what I thought then. Later I realized his subconscious had forced him to see me before it was too late. But he did see me, not as an animal but as a human being.

The hypo fell from his hand and shattered on the floor. I looked up and saw him standing there, his eyes filling with tears and his body stiffening in shock. "Oh, God," he said softly and his hands rose to cover his eyes.

All at once something weird happened. His hands dropped and his eyes looked different. They were clouded, as if a thin film had slid over them. I saw myself fade from his vision and from his mind and it was as if I weren't there. Like a smear on a window I had been wiped out of his existence. In amazement I watched as he began looking around the lab with a puzzled expression, watched as he finally gave a shrug and walked away. He went out of the building and I sat on the slab and tried to figure out what was going on. Eventually I followed him.

HE WAS standing on a hill and I ran after him. He tramped through a large garden of vegetables, walked down a path between two streams of water and came to a halt. From where I stood I could see another building. This one was long and narrow, and the greater part of it was built into the ground so that only about the top four feet of it was visible. The entrance was a steep stairwell scarred from rain and wind and choked with decaying leaves.

The man raced down the steps and threw himself at the two great doors. He battered at them with his fists, then looked anxiously about, as if he had forgotten how to open them. Several minutes passed before he pressed his shoulder against the back edge of the door on the right. Both immedi-

ately slid open and he hurried inside. I was right behind him.

I had never seen anything like that building. It contained a long series of walled-in cubicles. Their front partitions were made of transparent glass or plastic. There must have been hundreds of them for they ran far beyond my line of vision, side by side, to the left and right of a narrow corridor, and each one of them held dummies, mannikins. At least that was what I thought they were.

The man stood before the pane of the first cubicle. He raised his hands and said, "It isn't done yet, Radena. We haven't lasted out the terror. But be assured that we will."

"YOU FOOL—she's dead," I said behind him. "They're all dead."

Living people couldn't sit as those people sat. There were four in that first cubicle—a middle-aged man and woman, a young woman and a child. Dressed in blue robes, they sat stiffly on a velvet-covered couch and their eyes appeared to be focused straight ahead. The older couple was holding hands. The young woman beside them was slender and beautiful. A strand of her long golden hair touched the face of the child that lay in her arms.

"Radena," said the madman outside the cubicle. Taking a step forward, he lifted one hand and placed it flat against the clear window. "Speak to me. I want to hear you." After a long moment he sank to his knees and both hands went up to the glass.

Behind him I said, "She's dead. She can't speak to you."

All of a sudden there came a whirring sound followed by a metallic click and someone spoke. In this vault of the dead there were noises of living things.

"Tero," said a woman. "I speak but it is not my real voice you are hearing. Your presence energizes the recording mechanism. I was compelled to make the record because my strength is nearly gone. Listen to me, Tero. We have called back all the physicians. They have joined us in the ancestral vaults. Look at them and know the truth. My darling, it is too late. We have no more time. The bacteria has penetrated the filtering systems and we are dying. You cannot find the serum in time to save us. I have called and called but you do not respond. Your mother and father beg you to come to us. Give it up, Tero. You broke your heart trying to save us and now eternity awaits. I want to enter it with you. Please hurry."

The madman wept in his blind-

ness. His dull eyes lifted and saw movement where there was death and vacuum. His brain believed the lie. He perceived nothing that was real.

"Patience, Radena," he said gently.

"We'll find the cure. We are working night and day. Nothing can stop me. I love you."

Slowly he climbed to his feet and turned away, walked past me without knowing I was there. He left the sanctuary and swiftly climbed the steps leading to the fields and streams.

I WENT back to the lake. I took up my belt and gun and put them on. I left my clothes on the sand. From there I went to hunt for the festoons.

In a nearby valley I found hundreds of them. In its independent state a festoon looked like a cube of glittering quartz a foot high and as many inches across. It appeared to be hard and impenetrable but legend said that it was soft.

I approached a cube that rested in a patch of clover. Kneeling, I thrust my hands into the thing and it closed over me like a tender vise. As if from the other end of a long tunnel, a voice spoke in a hollow whisper. The inhumanness of the sound shocked me. This was the voice of alienness and it was intelligent.

"Welcome," said the festoon. "You desire me for your own?"

"No. I only want some information."

Along the endless tunnel came the whisper, "In exchange for a sample of your life force?"

"That depends on how much of it you consider a fair exchange."

The cube seemed to flow around my wrists. "You are creative."

"I assume that means I have energy to spare. But what if you decide to take it all?"

"I destroy nothing," said the festoon.

I wanted to yank my hands out of the thing and get away, but I remained still. "What do you do with the life force of a host?"

"The word is 'companion.' We are not parasites. We are happy with a companion and require but a small portion of his energy. Already I am using yours and you do not even notice. Festoons and Spenicki rose together from primal molecules. They care for us. We love them. We live as one."

"There is only a single Spenicki left."

"We could not combat the disease and they perished one by one. A certain number concealed themselves in the ancestral vaults in hopes that the few immunes would

find a cure. It was all for nothing. The companions are dead."

"One of your kind is a criminal. It lives in the man Tero and controls his senses. It makes him blind and deaf."

Did the hollow voice chuckle? "I know of no maverick festoon."

"Never mind what you think you know. Tell me how to open the man's eyes and ears."

"A festoon has little will of its own once it is inside a companion. Catch the man at a moment when his emotions are strong. Command him to hear, command his eyes to open and you will have the thing you desire. But you may not revel in his awareness. Beware of—"

"Don't lecture me," I said. "What happens to you now that there are no more companions?"

"We wait for others to come."

"The maverick festoon in the man wants to own him as long as it can. It blinds him so that he knows nothing of what goes on about him. How long can this continue if no one interferes?"

Like a whisper from the void came the answer: "For as long as he lives."

"I'll put a stop to it. I'll force him to command the thing to come out of him."

"You are leaving me now?"

"I am."

"Wait. Grant me total entrance."

"No," I said coldly.

"You deny your own spirit. Even as we communicate you grow warm. You desire me, yet you say no. My species lives in loneliness and hunger."

"Release me."

My hands came free in an instant. The festoon rested on the grass like a block of quartz and I swiftly walked away from it.

Where was I going? To track a man, to trace his footsteps. I stalked Tero as if he were already my own.

HE ATE from his garden so that he would have the strength to continue his hunt for specimens. Inside his body the maverick festoon nourished itself, lazed and perhaps dreamed and the thin portion of it which showed on Tero's back looked sleek and smooth and glittered in the sunlight. He was easy to watch and easy to follow.

He caught a wriggling creature in the fields. I followed him into the lab and watched him murder it with his experimenting. Then I stood behind him as he wept and buried it in the cemetery.

"Festoon, you're a disgrace to your species," I said.

Tero gave no sign that he heard me. With a chisel he carved a

picture of the animal on a fine piece of stone.

"You've blinded him completely to me, haven't you?" I said to the creature he wore. I knew it could hear me because it was using Tero's senses as if they belonged to it. "You would have let him kill me," I said. "It was his subconscious that forced you to let him see me at the last minute."

Tero went away to find another specimen and I let him go. I was hungry but the vegetables in the garden were not to my liking. I found an orchard of white fruit that tasted sweet and, as I stood and ate and did some dreaming of my own, something touched my foot.

A festoon rested against my leg. In a moment it flowed around my foot and cherished it. I started to object and then changed my mind.

"What is that noise?"

"You hear with keenness," said the festoon.

The sound was gone then. Or was it? I looked about. There were only the orchard, the ground, the clear sky, yet there was an odd throbbing sound in the air and it seemed to be coming from nearby.

"Someone is mourning," I said.

"Walk through the trees for a little while and you will see," said the festoon, releasing my foot.

Beyond the orchard was a valley where thousands of festoons congregated. There were large ones and small ones. Like chunks of ice they decorated the valley and their glitter was blinding. Beside me came the single specimen in a graceful rolling motion. As soon as it paused I plunged my foot into it.

"What are they doing?" I said.

"Listen."

Their grief was heavy and their need intense. Pressing close to one another, they sought comfort in an almost desperate manner. Suddenly they perceived my presence. In an instant their minds approached mine. I questioned. They answered. They let me see what had gone before on the planet.

FIRST came the dawn of the world and this was marked by upheavals. Then came the afternoon and the birth of man. Genes crossed in strange patterns that produced a two-fold entity, a double psyche or a twinned soul. A Spenicki newly born was a human infant and a festoon. The second was no more alien than the first. The two were one organism.

On rare occasions when a festoon abandoned its young companion the child died. The festoon also died. The presence of the creature was essential to the child until it

arrived at puberty, after which it rejected the festoon. This joined the common pool of festoons and waited until summoned by any Spenicki who desired it. They were unusual twins, spawned together to separate as the human soul groped toward maturity, the one to stand and wait, the other to strive for outward meaningfulness.

The Spenicki were gentle. They were also intelligent. In the beginning they went to the stars, traded their culture and goods with people on other worlds, became known as the scholars of the heavens. Their language was adopted by many and the knowledge of the festoons spread. But there was much wrangling between star systems and eventually the Spenicki withdrew and went no more into space. On their own world they grew mightily, but not as warriors. They built, but not a great deal. Their scattered cities were temporary shelters where travelers paused to rest. The Spenicki were natural rovers and they had once again begun to look at the stars when the epidemic came among them.

It was ironic that the brotherhood of festoon and man brought about the death of half the partnership. Knowledge of medicine was scant. Who needed a physician when one could take for himself a festoon who possessed the world's knowledge? The twin saw into the labyrinths of the mortal body, viewed it as a house to be kept in order, had the power to control the inner workings and knew those inner workings intimately.

One day came a storm with lightning flashes so severe that the higher reaches of the atmosphere may have been disturbed. Soon after that the dust began drifting down. It was yellow and heavy and soon after it started to fall the Spenicki began to die. The festoons grew frantic because all their efforts to destroy the bacteria failed.

Now there were no more companions—there was no more joy, no warmth in the brotherhood because there were no more brothers. Now the festoons gathered and feared and became almost human. They wanted a miracle.

They wanted me to give them a miracle. I understood what they meant. I was to go back where I came from, bring my people here and present them to their brothers. Were we not all one and the same?

We weren't the same and I told them so. The rest of the galaxy wanted no part of them. Festoons were taboo.

MY explanation puzzled them, made them ask more questions.

How could I teach a thing that it was repulsive when it had been conditioned to believe otherwise?

I told them about racism. This bewildered them. I talked of prejudice and they said it was illogical. I explained independent pride and they eagerly agreed that this was a good thing and then they spoke of a two-in-one singular twin. I continued talking and they continued to reply, but neither of us could compromise.

"You are not moved by our desolation," said the festoon who was by now wrapped securely around my foot.

I denied it.

"We mourn," they said.

I shrugged.

"Our lifespan is great," they said and my glance turned cold.

"We are your brothers," they said and I denied it in a loud and forceful voice.

"Another," they said and I understood and became angry.

I said, "My kind are all the same."

"Unlikely," said the festoon at my feet. The creature suddenly rejected me without being commanded. It set me free as if the contact with me were unpleasant. That made me more angry than I had been.

"I'm sorry," I said to the throng in the valley. "You can't expect me to do the impossible. Maybe the Spenicki wanted you but nobody else does."

They didn't hear. They were as deaf as Tero.

TO HELL with them. I walked away from the valley and away from the orchard, tramped through the fields and climbed the hill, stood on the path and gazed down at the sanctuary where the dead remnants of the Spenicki race sat and waited for time to destroy their atoms.

I knew the festoon in Tero was crafty. Would it permit him to know that his family was dead, let him know the world was empty, take a chance on the brother's choosing swift and final dissolution? Of course it wouldn't. The festoon was fighting for its life. It had blocked me out of Tero's awareness because I was strange. Anything strange might mean the end. Allow the brother to mow his lawn, dig in his garden, hunt for guinea pigs and grovel before the shrine of Radena, but never for an instant let him suspect the truth.

I had wasted enough time. Climbing onto the roof of the sanctuary I gathered a pile of sticks and dead leaves. Then I set my gun at its lowest heat and set fire to the pile. Black smoke began

to sweep upward and the wind took it.

Several minutes passed and Tero came out of the lab. He saw the smoke and came running.

"Stop," he cried. I knew he was shouting at the wind. The festoon wouldn't permit him to see me. Breaking a limb from a tree, Tero jumped to the roof of the building and swept the burning pile onto the ground.

As I had known he would, he immediately went down to the building to make certain that all was safe. I was there and waiting for him. He raced in through the door and hurried over to the first cubicle.

"Radena, are you well?"

"Radena is not well," I said, but his ears were sealed by the festoon. I gazed at him for a long moment before I turned and aimed the gun. What I wanted to do was blast the face of Radena, but then the effect might be ruined. He had to see her body topple over as the vacuum inside the cubicle was destroyed by inrushing air.

The gun was still set at its lowest power. I didn't increase it. Aiming at the top left corner of the transparent wall, I squeezed the trigger. The heat beam took out a corner of the wall and a section of the roof.

Not waiting to see the bodies fall from the couch, I whirled to Tero. "See your dead woman?" I said. "Look at her and then forget her. Put her in the past where she belongs. Live in the present and in the future with me. I'm here. I'm real. I'm not a ghost."

The emotions of Tero were stronger than the grip of the festoon and he suddenly saw what was happening in the cubicle. All at once his body went rigid. I could see him trying to deny the vision before him but his emotions were too intense and the delicate chains of the festoon were annihilated.

My hand was pressed against my mouth. I tasted blood and knew I had bitten myself. I had wanted to take pleasure from his pain but I couldn't. The horror on his face was not satisfying to me. His terror seemed to grow in intensity and I was afraid he would die of shock.

UNABLE to look at him I ran past him, hurried out of the building. I didn't stop running until I was well away from the place.

He came after me. I watched as he climbed the hill and I wanted to shout at him to hurry, to look alive, to be aware of me as a girl who had wanted him from the very beginning.

He moved so slowly and he looked so old. The sunlight was being cruel to him.

But it wasn't the sun. His spirit was dead. He reached the rise of the hill and came to a halt and I found myself looking at a zombie. His eyes were filled with tears. His arms hung at his sides. Even the brightness of his hair had faded. Limp and almost lifeless, he stood and looked at the ground.

I shivered and gritted my teeth. "Get rid of the festoon," I said harshly. "It's your enemy. It lied to you."

For a long minute he made no response. Then his head finally came up and for the first time he looked at me. I thought I was prepared for that first glance, in fact I was ready for practically anything, but no scorn or rage blasted at me from his eyes. Not even hatred. What he gave me was indifference—nothing. I was there but I didn't matter. The distance between us might as well have been a light-year.

Raising both arms toward the sky he said, "I tried," and his voice was gentle. "In my own way I live and die. Festoon, go from me."

The creature came out of his pores like thick perspiration and this required no more than a few seconds. Its glittering mass collected on his chest and clung there, seemingly loath to let him go. From where I stood I could almost hear its faint wail of sorrow.

"Goodbye, old friend," said Tero.

Then I knew. I swayed with shock. This was no maverick festoon.

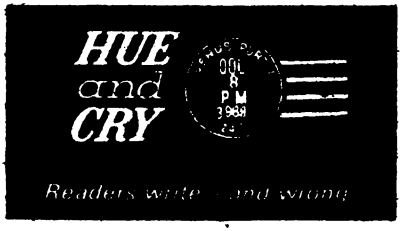
Tero's will had been its will. It had hidden only what he asked to have hidden. The thing had always done what he wanted. He had preferred illusion and pain to the peace of death. He had remained in his blind torment for the purpose of seeing the one face that held meaning for him. Now that was gone.

The festoon loosened its hold on his chest and dropped to the ground.

I knew something else then. I knew death. I saw it come in waves. Tero stood silent and unafraid as time wreaked its final havoc upon him.

For how long had the festoon brother held his body together as glue held bits of old paper? For a thousand years? For ten thousand? Or more?

His marvelous physique was destroyed before my eyes. The gold of his hair became gray. Bones crumbled. Flesh shrank. The whole of what had been a man caved inward like weakened sod. In front of my eyes Tero died. His great bulk swayed, tottered, fell apart. What scattered at my feet were a few bits of debris. ●



Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

In the Reading Room *for August, 1972, Lester del Rey considers the feasibility of a brief description of science fiction as opposed to fantasy. He states that, in effect, one is forced to accept no definition at all or only a circular one.*

Now it is a simple and easy proposition in formal logic to show that a dictionary either contains an undefined term or else all of its definitions are circular. Mr. del Rey's observation is an extension of this proposition, no doubt as readily demonstrated within the propositional calculus.

Fortunately, for he had a sound reason for doing so, he refused to accept this formal rebuff and went on about the business at hand, that of phrasing a succinct statement of what sf is about. Mr. del Rey is not a man easily put upon, or off, and his explication of the state of affairs is convincing.

His key words and phrases are these: rationality, fiction, alternate, *and* sf is that fiction which deals rationally with alternate possibilities.

It will be objectionable to some that science has short shrift in his formulation. Science is one of the actualities of sf.

Science is the binder, no less than the base. To paraphrase from the ancient texts of rhetoric, science is the unity and coherence of sf, whereas speculation provides the emphasis and the difference.

It is science that raises the coefficient of credibility to the level of consent.

It is possible to go a little more in the direction that science is essential. The universality of science is a major component of the credibility of sf. And sf is the point of maximal convergence of fiction imitating science and fiction imitating reality. For sf imitates science in the Aristotelian sense that art imitates nature. There is a pervasive instinct for "other" and it is science that is, in this context, the compelling frame that holds the work in its proper shape.

Science is public knowledge and has a social dimension (John Ziman). It is upon the first of these, among other things, that fiction relies for concurrence with its inventions and for its background and milieu. Fiction is a part of the social fabric and sf is a part of the fabric of science, if only a patch thereon.

The "scientific method" is an integral part of any conception of science and it is implicit that the use of science in sf brings with it the scientific method and leads to agreement with and reliance upon the imaginative constructs of this fiction. It is the sf writer's use of the precepts of the scientific method that lends corroboration to what otherwise would be an unconvincing narrative.

Thus it seems at least to me that Mr. del Rey's definition should have a favorable reception—with the proviso that science is a necessary addition.

As to fantasy—

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye . . .

Alexander Doniphan Wallace
Graduate Research Professor
University of Florida

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

With all due respect to Mr. del Rey, I'm afraid I find his definition of sf much too narrow. "Fiction that deals rationally with alternate possibilities" is obviously one man's description of what he personally likes—not necessarily what others like. And it manages to exclude most classic sf, if not much of contemporary science fiction. Certainly Doc Smith's improbable novels cannot be classified as sf, under Mr. Del Rey's definition—they're not possible alternatives—they're fantasies. And yet people obviously think of them as sf despite their logical absurdity. (Unless science took a swift turn to the left we just didn't have the technology to build a ship of Skylark's *size and potential in 1927.) Also, what does "possible" mean? Isn't the background and development of* Seven Days in May *possible—and isn't the story's setting a "possible alternative"—and isn't it "fiction handled rationally"—and doesn't this, by Mr. del Rey's definition, make it perfect sf? Yet aren't novels of the* Seven Days in May *genre precisely what Mr. del Rey condemns?*

Further, Mr. del Rey's definition is apparently born of a feeling on his part that the boundaries of modern sf are becoming too blurred. Why he considers this bad I frankly don't understand—to me it indicates that sf is filled with vitality, a vitality that cannot be contained by narrow definitions. Describing sf, giving it regular shape and size, is like trying to contain the wind—a little bit always escapes and you're forced to become just a little larger in order to contain it all.

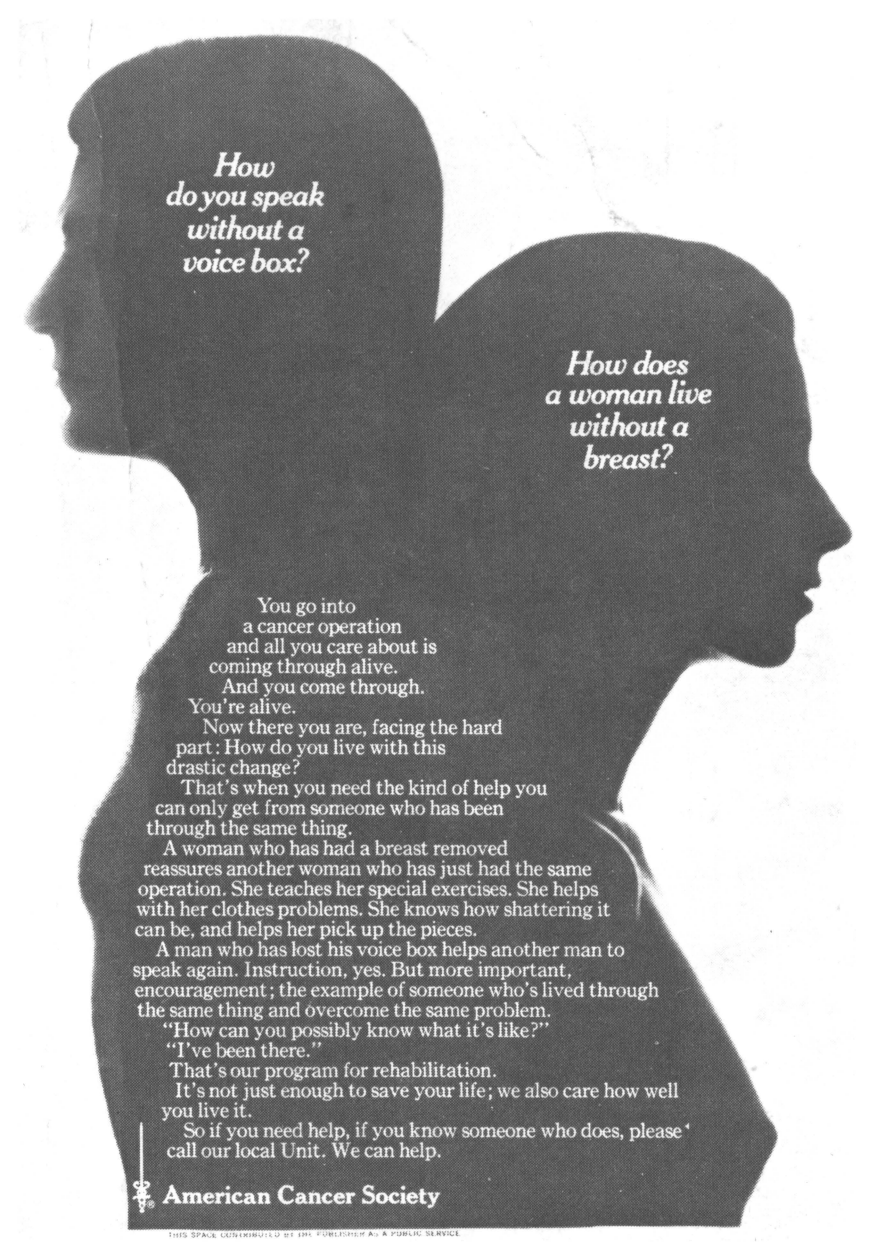
It was once quite easy to pinpoint sf—it was pulp fiction, badly written, adolescently conceived, dealing with journeys within the realm of scientific imagination. That was a generation ago and it covered everything from the worst to the best. Now things have changed and we find it impossible to explain just what it is about sf that we like or that, for us, makes it unique.

Perhaps the most honest definition of science fiction is Damon Knight's: "Science fiction is what we're pointing at when we say 'science fiction.' "

Gerard F. Conway
Briarwood, N.Y.

More on this to come—you'd better believe it.

—JAKOBSSON


How do you speak without a voice box?
How does a woman live without a breast?
You go into a cancer operation and all you care about is coming through alive. And you come through. You're alive.
Now there you are, facing the hard part: How do you live with this drastic change?
That's when you need the kind of help you can only get from someone who has been through the same thing.
A woman who has had a breast removed reassures another woman who has just had the same operation. She teaches her special exercises. She helps with her clothes problems. She knows how shattering it can be, and helps her pick up the pieces.
A man who has lost his voice box helps another man to speak again. Instruction, yes. But more important, encouragement; the example of someone who's lived through the same thing and overcome the same problem.
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