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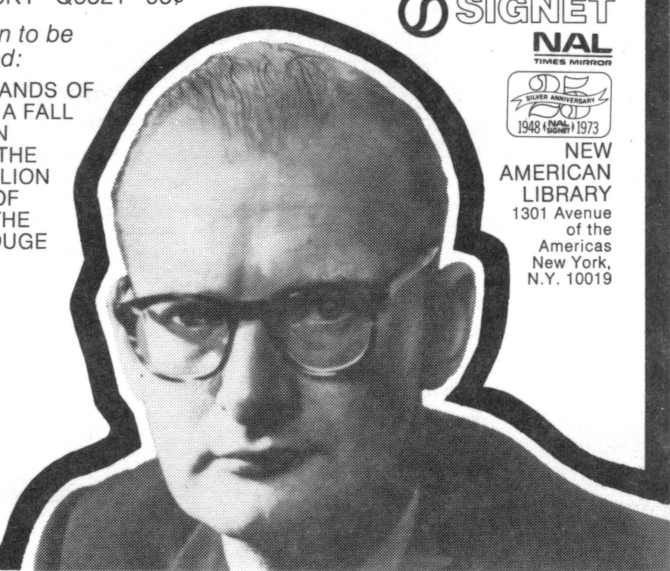
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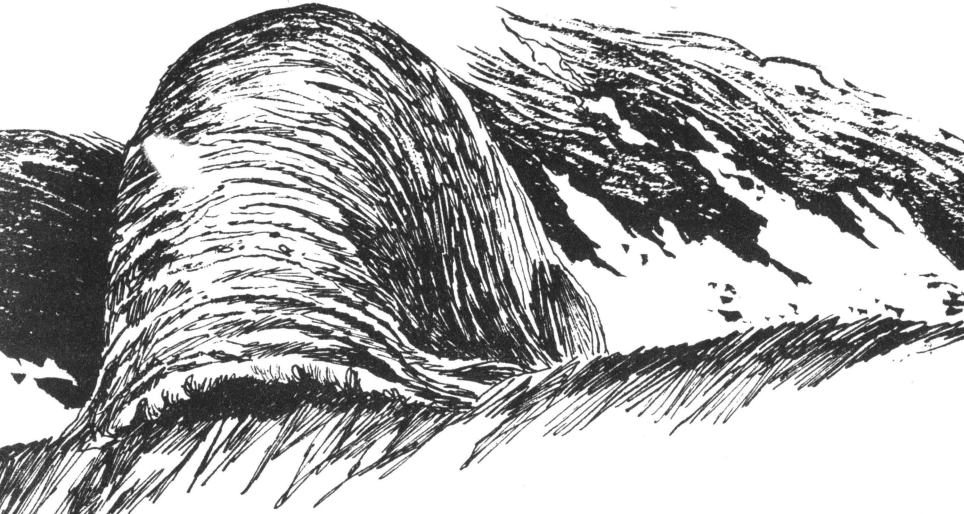
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PRICE OF HONOR

*Evolution had bestowed speech upon dogs and
far harvests upon man. All should have been
paradise, yet bitter conflict persisted . . .*

KENNETH VON GUNDEN





I

RAY LARKIN hefted his energy rifle impatiently as Beowulf sniffed the air again and walked forward a few steps. Larkin watched the scout dog amble over to Littlejohn's point and then to Anson's. When brief, gravelly conversation with each assured Beowulf the area was clean, the scout dog trotted back to Larkin and growled, "Safe, Ray."

To a human ear untuned to a scout dog's harsh and grating voice, the slurred flat speech might have been unintelligible. But to Ray

Larkin it was perfectly clear. The three huge dogs and the man moved out, a well-coordinated unit.

One of the other scout dogs had reported a large herd of those antelope-like animals in the area so Ray felt a little expedition was in order. The antelope always attracted predators and Centaurs, posing a danger that could not be ignored.

Larkin's eyes never stopped moving, darting from small hill to small hill, questioning the slightest quiver of the low bushes. His caution was superfluous, he knew, for the dogs could sense any danger long

before it became apparent to his inferior senses.

As he walked, Larkin inspected the small plants and wild grasses that would no longer exist after the voracious cholos passed this way, devouring everything in their path. The cholos had been at work terraforming the surface of the continent for more than six months now. But Larkin, who had never worked with cholos before his marriage to Mary and Taylor, still found the giant slugs a source of wonder. At the moment they ought to be about two or three kilometers behind him, guided by Mary and Taylor and the remaining six scout dogs.

He snapped out of his reverie as the dogs halted, testing the air. "What is it?" he called to Beowulf.

"Hide cats. Maybe seven. Heading this way."

"Think they know we're here?"

Beowulf nodded his shaggy head at the rippling grass and answered, "Yes, Ray. Bad wind."

Larkin agreed: the erratic wind was changing direction every few seconds, surely carrying the scent of man and dogs to the cats. It was the scout dogs who had named them, "hide cats." The powerful felines preyed mainly on the antelope-like animals that grazed on the many wild grasses of the prairie. The cats were big, about one-and-a-half meters tall at the shoulder. For all their size, though, they were lean and sleek—obviously designed for explosive bursts of speed over limited dis-

tances. In the open, however, or if the chase lasted for more than ten seconds, not even the fastest cat could catch the slowest of the amazingly fleet antelope with their comic but effective leaping gait. Neither were the cats six-limbed like the antelope although they carried tiny vestigial grasping limbs on both sides of their throats. But nature had given the hide cats an additional weapon to compensate for their lack of endurance. Each cat bore markings on its sides enabling it to lie down on one side and melt into the grass so perfectly that a careless antelope could stumble over the camouflaged creature before becoming aware of its presence.

Larkin disengaged the safety on his rifle and warned the dogs to be ready. "Those dumb bastards will rush us the moment they see us. They haven't a brain in their heads," he cautioned Littlejohn and the others.

A trickle of sweat rolled down Larkin's back in spite of the chill edge to the wind. Nor was he alone in feeling the tension that builds before action—the hair on the dogs' necks was rising in ragged clumps. He wanted to crack a joke but could not. And though human testicles had lost that ability long ago, he thought he felt his own trying to ascend into his abdomen for protection.

Larkin and the dogs topped a small rise—and suddenly were face to face with the hide cats. For one excruciatingly long second nothing

moved save the tops of the grasses. Then, like figures in a film that unexpectedly shifts from slow to speeded-up motion, both groups exploded into action.

Larkin was aware of the streak of yellow hurtling through the grass at him and he brought the rifle up to his shoulder in one quick motion, squeezing the trigger by reflex. The energy bolt blew the predator's head off and the momentum of the cat's attack carried its headless torso to Larkin's booted feet, spraying them with blood.

Beowulf, three hundred pounds of snapping, barking fury, bowled over two cats larger than himself with an audacious charge. Confused and surprised, the two cats slashed out at each other as they tumbled over and over together. Beowulf took advantage of the situation to rip out the throat of the nearest one while it fought with its companion.

Anson and Littlejohn, screaming canine obscenities, darted among three of the cats and slashed open their bellies. The enraged animals could only claw and bite futilely at the dogs' long hair, a protection as efficient as armor so long as the cats were unable to find a secure hold.

While Beowulf bit through the spinal cord of his hamstringed opponent, Larkin killed the remaining hide cat with a hurried shoulder shot.

Anson, muzzle stained a deep red, looked down at a pile of steaming entrails on the grass, then turned to Littlejohn. "Fun, hah? Kill plenty

hide cats this time. We teach cats to fool with man and dogs."

"Yeah," agreed Larkin, wiping hide cat blood from his cheek. "Fun."

THE occupants of the camp moved leisurely among the small earthen huts and flickering cooking fires, laughing and gossiping. They were mostly females and children. The males, except those too old or crippled to hunt, were following a leaper herd to the south. Only two or three able-bodied warriors had been left behind to watch over the camp. The other males on hand, mostly malcontents or poor hunters, grumbled about having to miss the excitement and glory of the hunt.

Runner-with-the-Wind studied the activities of the camp from the top of a small hill. With him were twenty members of his *sharn*, or war party. Despite the sounds of rapid breathing and the stamping of hoofs behind him, Runner was not about to lead his warriors, many of them youngsters, down on the camp until he was absolutely certain everything was exactly as it seemed to be. Runner was young still, but determined not to make the mistakes of youth. He had successfully passed his manhood test six summers ago, killing a *gnur*—as his people called hide cats—with nothing but his *shar*, the short thrusting spear all male warriors carried. He had been so sure of himself then; but the long scar on his left flank was a

constant reminder that unstudied action can lead to crippling or death. Still, his killing of the *gnur* after being severely wounded had been a bold act. His mother had made a song about his exploit and his elder brother had sung it before their father and the council of the tribe. Both his father and his brother were dead now and it was he who carried the quirt of the chieftain, the *koro*.

Finally satisfied that all was as it appeared, Runner gave a hand signal to attack. Hoofs blurring, the warriors swept over the crest of the hill. They yelled and screamed as they dashed across a water-gutted opening, barren of the life-giving *teve*, and into the camp.

As the intruders swarmed around the outlying huts the few guards tried uselessly to halt the *sharn*'s advance. One old warrior, his tail braid already more white than brown, bravely planted himself squarely between the huts and the onrushing attackers. Gnurkiller, Runner's chief lieutenant and younger brother, closed with him and the two whirled in a dance choreographed to end in death. Gnurkiller avoided a weak thrust and drove his own *shar* into the heavy lower body of the old warrior. The fire-hardened tip pierced the old one's heart and he fell to his knees, crying out piteously before toppling into dust soaked with his own blood.

Several of Runner's warriors carried torches of dried *teve* which they lit by holding them over the

cooking fires. Torches aflame, the intruders plunged into the darkness of the huts. Old men armed with nothing but stones were pushed back by the fire and then killed. Runner thrust his flaming bundle of *teve* into the face of a defender with a deformed leg. The cripple recoiled, turned to run. Runner caught him at the door of the hut and speared him through the base of his skull.

The hut interiors roiled with the chaos of close-quarter fighting. Some females remained passive. Others ran in circles, bit, kicked out and otherwise tried to avoid capture. To Runner's way of thinking this was good: such females would bear bold sons.

Many of the females had already borne children, of course, and often these children, unaware that the men wanted only young or childless women, tried to defend their mothers as best they could. Runner's men were forced to slash with their hoofs at these young ones to drive them off. Children were knocked unconscious or tumbled against the walls of the hut by the impatient raiders.

"Quickly," Runner-with-the-Wind shouted to his men in a hut grown foul with smoke and the sweat of fear. "Take the females and let us depart!"

Runner was frantically trying to direct his companions' efforts and see that none lingered too long in any one hut.

"Idiots!" He struck two of his

warriors who had stopped to argue over a beautiful young female. The *koro's* sting made them realize their foolishness. "This is not the time to fight among ourselves. Just take her!" Runner was only too aware that, had he allowed it, some of his men would be so foolish as to try to mount the females here and now. They were like so many children, and it was his responsibility to be their stern father.

Driving the captured females—now called *sharnan*, or booty—before them, the raiding party galloped out of the looted camp and disappeared into the still lowering darkness of night. Behind them a baby wailed forlornly.

THE JOURNEY to their own camp was several hours long, and the captured females complained about everything—they were acting like true *sharnan* already. Their feet were hot and tired; they were thirsty; they wanted to rest... Runner told them to be quiet or they would feel the caress of his *koro*.

There was a time to be gentle and even loving to a *sharna* but there was also a time when such forbearance was jarringly out of place. His own *sharnan* at the camp knew this belief of his and acted accordingly, careful of his ephemeral moods. Those among these captured females who would become his would soon learn the ways of their lord and master. Some would have to be beaten, some would cry out and tear their hair

to complain of their rank within his family, but all would eventually acquiesce—they were *sharnan*, after all, not warriors, not men.

The young sentry at the camp touched his forehead in deference, then watched enviously as the successful raiding party marched proudly into its own encampment, wearing pride like fine bone-jewelry.

"Runner, Runner!" shouted the eight *sharnan* of his huts, crowding around him with their children clinging shyly to their hands. Runner reached out and pulled several of the females to him, giving each a hug or a warm caress. He disliked such public shows of affection but they were expected of him. Runner, as always, submitted to the call of duty. He smiled at his children though he was, as always, slightly uncomfortable with them, especially his daughters. He wished he could remember the names of at least some of them, but to him all his children looked alike.

He turned to the new *sharnan*. Already several warriors were prepared to fight over the distribution of the females. He silenced their arguments with a hard glance and strode in among the females to have his pick of the lot. The raiding party had captured more than thirty and it was only fair that he, as chieftain, should receive at least four for his hut.

Quickly he picked out three, amid incompletely stifled groans as favorites were lost. After his third choice he paused a moment, then slowly

ambled over to the beautiful young *sharna* who had nearly caused two of his men to come to blows in the enemy camp.

"No!" gasped one of the two involuntarily.

"No-? No?" rasped Runner-with-the-Wind. "Are you now chieftain here?" he demanded. He lashed out with his *koro*, landing a stinging blow across the other's flank. "You shall choose last for daring to question my primacy-of choice!"

The brief confrontation further upset the already frightened young *sharna* and she tried to back away, her flanks heaving. There was no place for her to go. Older females, aware of the futility of fighting the inevitable and resigned to the concept of marriage by kidnap, thrust her forward again.

Runner-with-the-Wind held out his hand and spoke softly. "Come, little one. I will not harm you, I swear it."

Slowly, shyly, she stepped forward tentatively and slipped her small hand into his. His grasp reassured her. He led her quietly past his other newly acquired *sharnan*, pausing only to speak to Nami, his number one *sharna*. "Take the other new ones to my huts and see that they are properly fed. Then let them rest. I want no fighting among you. See that their welcome is genuine."

Runner-with-the-Wind led the young *sharna*, trembling still in fear and anticipation, to the privacy of the hut he kept solely for mating. He lit a candle of leaper fat and studied

the planes of her face in its faint glow.

"What is your name, little one?"

"Sunchaser."

"Do you know how old you are?"

"I have seen fifteen summers."

"You look older. And you are very beautiful."

"Thank you, my lord. You are—I mean—" She cast her eyes down shyly, not daring to look at his lean hard body.

Runner thoughtfully fingered one of his decorative scars. This one seemed so young, so innocent. He promised himself he would do nothing now to cause her in the future to fear his need for her. He would not take her in any manner that might turn her from him. He began.

II

MARY, Elizabeth Brennen Castlereagh-Larkin was disgusted by the interior of the nitro-propelled hover-van that served both as mobile lab and living quarters for her and Ray and Taylor. It was a mess. Not a dirty mess, but the kind of disorderly mess that any working area becomes when concern is more for the work than for appearance. The place had not really had a good cleaning in the nearly six months they had been on the surface of New Kansas, and it looked it. Mary did most of the cleaning, not because she was a woman and it was her place to do it—let Ray or Taylor suggest that

and she would remind them of her brown belt before bouncing them off the walls and ceiling—but because the lab was hers and she felt responsible for it. She knew, though, that both men would complain that putting things in some semblance of order would cause notes and papers, normally right at hand, to lose themselves under miscellaneous headings in the files. Well, the two of them would just have to scream, she concluded. But where to start?

Roughly half the van was lab/work area, with the remaining half devoted to human needs. In the extreme rear of the van was the bathroom with its sonic shower and chemical toilet facilities. Further front were the sleeping quarters and the tiny closets totally inadequate to the needs of three people. Given all the limitations the living room, however, was fairly spacious with a carpet deep enough to lose a small dog in and body-heat furniture. Built into the walls were various audio-visual entertainment facilities to cut boredom into manageable sizes, and here and there aborigine sculpture from New Australia decorated the area. The reading material—enough to stock a fair-sized public library in a medium-sized city—was on microfilm and, via the stationary satellites ringing the planet, could be exchanged with the other 987 people busy terraforming other parts of New Kansas. At the midpoint of the van, situated to serve both working and living quarters, was the small electronic kitchen.

The front of the van was devoted solely to Mary's scientific instruments and measuring devices. The tiny lab computer could handle minor problem-solving chores and little else, but it saved Mary drudgery.

Tall and slender, with curves and hollows in all the right places, Mary was a stunning young woman. Her chestnut hair cascaded down to her shoulders, enhancing a light dusting of freckles. But she had not been attractive as a child and had not yet fully accepted as real her metamorphosis into a beauty.

Mary had been taking post-graduate courses in chemistry at the University of Brazil when she first met Ray Larkin through her husband Taylor. Soon the three were spending a great deal of time together. Then Taylor, an agrobiologist already accepted into the Planetary Colonization Bureau, spent six months on the colony planet learning the ins and outs of breeding and caring for cholos. His only obligation was one year's service for the Bureau.

Placed in charge of "protecting" Mary by a trusting Taylor during his absence, Ray started to fall in love with her himself. It had all seemed so ludicrous at first: Mary was a member of the Matriarchal Party, from which came almost all of the Federation's leaders, and she had wounded a man in a duel. Protecting Mary seemed as necessary as protecting a scout dog from a chipmunk.

As for Ray Larkin, he was an

indifferent anthropologist. He had written his thesis on the social interaction and sexual practices of scout dogs. This led to an ever greater degree of interest in the dogs and he applied for his own team. As a free-lancer he and his dogs had completed two lucrative missions for the Bureau by the time he met Taylor and Mary.

Ray was slight, a writer of poetry, and basically a loner. For most of his life he had felt himself outside the mainstream of human social activity. He would rather play complex games with Cheng, his cybernetic apartment house computer, than attend a party or group grope. Mary had grown used to staying in on Saturday nights with him in his apartment, smoking through a few narcostiks and listening to his unique collection of scout-dog folk songs rather than joining other students in more typical activities.

And then Taylor returned. Ray and Mary had struggled to devise some painless way of telling him about them. Actually they had not had to say a word—their faces had told the story. In two months they had put their thumbs to a “triple”—a three-way marriage contract.

“**W**HAT is it, Anson?”
The big dog had just trotted back from his position as point. “Centaur’s been here—nosing ’round, Ray,” the dog replied.

Ray then saw the marks left by the hooved feet of the Centaur’s.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. They’re still curious about us.”

“Hah!” said Beowulf. “Anson is so hurried up—”

“Anxious,” corrected Ray.

“Yah—anxious, then, to get back to camp today. That why he was first to smell Centaur’s. Mebbe Anson anxious see someone.”

“Mebbe Ozma,” suggested Little-john.

“What you know!” snapped Anson.

“Well, now,” said Ray. “I’ve noticed, too, how you’ve been sniffing around Ozma a bit more than around the other females. You wouldn’t be having a little private romance with her, would you?” Ray knew the scout dogs were not normally monogamous.

“We are almost there,” said Anson stonily. The rest laughed at his obvious discomfort, but neither long nor nastily.

Ray left the dogs to proceed on their own into camp and headed for the line of cholos. They never ceased to amaze him and he often stopped off on his way back to the hover-van to watch them methodically eating their way through the grasses.

It was rapidly getting dark and Ray nearly stumbled when he emerged from the heavy grass onto a bare patch of earth. Completely devoid of grass, the patch was as wide as a country lane and snaked away through the grass. Ray followed the “road” with his eyes—right up to the point where it ran smack up to a

huge "rock" lying across its path. The "rock" was a cholo. The "road" through the grass was the result of the cholo's having just passed through a few minutes ago.

The cholo's size became readily apparent as Ray approached it from behind. He walked forward until the rear of the gray-white mass of the creature's body loomed over him. Because of his position he had no fear for his life—no cholo could move in any direction but forward. In addition, a cholo was harmless unless frightened. Even then Ray would have to be standing in its immediate path to be injured.

The square, blunt tail of the cholo scraped over the bare ground, leaving it moist and steaming slightly in the cool evening air. There was a noticeable though not unpleasant odor rising from the newly bared soil in the wake of the giant beast.

RAY SMILED to himself as he remembered the day Taylor had shown him his first cholo. The smell was one of the first things he had asked about.

"That odor, what is it? It's—it's almost like—"

"Like freshly baked bread?" finished Taylor.

"Yeah, that's it."

"Shit."

"Ahhh, I beg your pardon?"

Taylor laughed and explained, "It's the smell of a cholo's natural excretion."

"Oh."

Ray slowly walked over to the untouched grass parallel to the track of the cholo. It was the first cholo Ray had ever seen outside of holographs and it was indeed an impressive sight. Only the great blue whale of the Terran oceans could equal it in size—but of course there were no more blue whales on Earth.

"How much does one of those things weigh?"

"Approximately fifteen tons," Taylor replied. "That's back on Earth, of course, not here on this training planet. They're twenty meters long by three meters wide and four meters high. They eat the equivalent of their own weight every twenty-four hours, Earth-standard time. Developed over two hundred years ago by the Bureau's labs from unsegmented earthworms, they're artificially engineered creatures specifically developed to range over the surfaces of Terran-type planets unable to—" He stopped, shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm beginning to lecture."

"Please go on. It's all most fascinating."

"Well, okay. As I was saying, they're put to work on planets unable to support Terran plant forms in their unaltered states. For instance, on New Kansas the cholos will eat great swathes through the local vegetation and topsoil and excrete a waste. That waste is as deadly a poison for the native plants as it is a highly efficient fertilizer for the Terran crops that will some day be

growing here long after the cholos have passed."

He pointed to the bare earth left in the wake of the cholo.

"On New Kansas, with its winds, soil left like that would soon blow away. The last thing we'll be trying to create is a dustbowl, so to hold the newly transformed soil for the Terran plants we'll sow Terran grasses behind the cholos."

THAT had been Ray's introduction to the cholos. Now, on New Kansas himself, he never tired of observing their endless mealtime.

He walked to the front of the cholo and watched it attack the grasses with great vigor. The cholo's mouth was a gaping hole into which the tall grass disappeared. This cholo, like the others, never stopped eating: cholos possessed no muscles to close their mouths.

Ray lit a narcostik and stared at the creature's featureless visage. Nothing but the mouth differentiated the cholo's front from its rear. The huge slug was eyeless—Ray's dogs served as the cholos' eyes.

Each dog carried a small transmitter on a collar around its neck. Similarly, each of the cholos had a small receiver implanted in its flesh on both the right and left sides of its body. Slaved to the transmitters, the receivers imparted a brief, sharp stab of pain—whenever one of the dogs got within ten meters of a cholo. This made it easy for the cholos to be driven in any desired direction. In its

forehead each cholo also had a small electronic "eye" that sent back images to Ray's pocket receiver and to a receiver in the van. By choosing among channels one to twenty-five Ray could monitor any of the cholos.

Ray mused that his was not an easy job. He had a hover-scooter and nine dogs, one of which was pregnant. The ten of them were supposed to guard and guide twenty-five cholos. That meant keeping away hide cats and curious Mierson's Centaurs. The Centaurs seemed content to leave the cholos and dogs alone. For the time being, anyway.

Ray ground out his butt and headed back for the van.

BEOWULF led his small party back to the temporary camp Ray had devised for the scout dogs. His lips curled back in pleasure as first the females and then the males greeted him.

"How it go?" asked the pregnant Mama-san.

"Good. We got to kill hide cats."

"Oh?" said Frodo. "Tell us 'bout it."

Beowulf shook his head. "Food first. Then I tell all that happened."

Even as he spoke Pandora brought him some antelope meat. Ozma did the same for Anson and Littlejohn.

"Before eat, we recite the Law," said Beowulf.

They formed a rough circle.

"What is the Law?" intoned Beowulf.

"To stand by Man's side, as dogs have always stood."

"What is the Law?"

"To place duty above self, honor above life."

"What is the Law?"

"To allow harm to come to no man, to protect man and his possessions."

"What is the Law?"

"To stand by man's side—as dogs will always stand."

"Let us eat."

RUNNER'S various *sharnan*, new and old, were finishing their meal of leaper flesh cooked over damp leaves lying on hot coals. As they ate they stared morosely at Runner's mating hut.

Kirinav, Runner's number two *sharna*, glanced at one of the new females and asked, "You—what is the name of the new *sharna* spending the night with Runner?"

The young *sharna* chewed on a piece of rubbery meat for a moment before replying. "My name is Zarav—not 'you.' The one our man took is named Sunchaser. Had it not been for the raid she would have been sleeping with another in one moon's time."

"Bah! All men are the same," sneered Nan-ha.

"I don't believe that," said Peo. "Runner is good to us. And brave."

"Bravery," said Kirinav, looking up momentarily from her self-appointed task of braiding a young child's tail. "What is bravery but a

word the men use to hide the killing of the old and weak?"

"How can you say that? What do you mean?" asked Zarav.

"She means," replied Nan-ha, "that our men play at war and raiding as our children play at tag."

"I did not wish to be taken away from my tribe," said a puzzled Zarav, "but nothing about it resembled child's play. Many brave, old and crippled men died defending us from seizure."

"God of the Winds!" exclaimed Kirinav, "she really doesn't know the truth!"

"Truth? What truth?" asked a still-bewildered Zarav.

Nami, who had been listening silently but had been reluctant to enter the conversation until now, put her arm around Zarav and asked, "Do you in all honesty really not know about the raids the men carry out?"

"Please, what are you all talking about?"

"I will tell you," said Nan-ha. "It is all an elaborate game, played so that the warriors of the tribes might mate with *sharnan* from other camps. In any camp, at least five or six females are born for every male. When one tribe's council feels that there are enough young females of child-bearing age and enough old or crippled warriors to warrant it, they approve a raid against their own camp. Nothing is done overtly. Instead, they become careless ever so slowly. Soon scouts from other tribes

are aware of where their camp is and how many females without children are living in it. Then, one day, the warriors make a great show of going off to hunt leapers. The old and the lame are left behind to guard the females. When the warriors finally return, they find that their camp has been raided. Much noise is made, but somehow the raiders are never found." She paused a moment. "And that is how your camp came to be raided, too."

"No! I cannot believe such a monstrous thing! What about the old ones—they fought back, they tried!"

"Yes, of course. Such a raid is their chance to find a death weighted with honor, not shame. The same holds true for the lame and crippled. And there are boundaries which must be observed. You have noticed, haven't you, that only females without children were taken—those who had no husbands to feed them?"

"But—"

"Hush, child," soothed Nami. "Men must have their chance to feel brave. Besides, it has gotten you a husband and provider."

III

AFTER Ray had told Mary and Taylor about the hide cats that evening, he mentioned Anson's finding the scent of Centaurs just outside the camp.

"What do you think it means?" asked Mary.

"Hard to say," answered Ray.

"Maybe they're just curious about us."

"I hope that's all it is," said Taylor. "But don't count on it."

"Ah, want to elaborate on that?" said Ray.

"Sure. There are dozens of other groups on the various continents working the land just as we are, right? Well, some of them have started having more run-ins with the Centaurs than ever before."

"I see," said Ray slowly.

"You and the dogs better be extra careful from now on."

"Hmmm. I suppose you're right."

Ray thought about the Centaurs—and that evoked memories of the day the three of them had signed on for New Kansas.

MELVIN NHROMA, half black and half Israeli, a round man with gleaming ivory teeth, was the career Planetary Colonization Bureau official in charge of recruiting terraformers for New Kansas. If he carried off the precolonization operations cleanly he would be promoted to the position of Assistant to the Assistant to the Co-Vice-Director of Sector Ag-17n.

Sitting across from Nhroma, with Taylor and Mary, Ray fidgeted in his chair. He wished the man would cease sermonizing and get to the signing of the papers.

"Yes, New Kansas will be a marvelous colony world for us. Of course the soil must be altered ever so slightly to favor Terran plants, and

the oceans must be sown with micro-organisms to prepare vast areas of the northern continent for eventual colonization and farming. It won't be easy." Ray cupped his chin in his hands; he knew a zealot when he saw one. "There will be wild animals, disease, wind, cold, but eventually you will triumph."

"We're not heroes, you know," said Taylor. "We'll be getting paid for our efforts."

"Certainly. Those of you who survive—if I may be so indelicate—will be named First Citizens of New Kansas. A special tax will be levied on the colonists to keep you in luxury for the rest of your lives—if that is what you desire."

"Yes, yes," said Ray impatiently, "but you mentioned wild animals. Does that category include the Mierson's Centaurs?"

"Where—how`did you learn of them?"

"Things have a way of getting around."

"Well, I suppose I must be frank, then. As you probably know already, they're called Mierson's Centaurs after the xenobiologist of the first scouting party to explore New Kansas. In reality, of course, they bear only a surface resemblance to Earth's mythical half-human, half-horse centaurs," he explained.

"And how did Mierson find out all this?" asked Mary.

"There was a fight. An expedition member and two Centaurs were killed. One of the two Centaurs

happened to be female and Mierson's cursory dissection turned up some interesting anomalies."

"Such as?"

"Well, the Centaurs are a curious mixture of mammalian and reptilian life. Like mammals, they bear their young alive from an internal womb and suckle them from teats on the undersides of their bodies—just where they're located on a horse or cow."

"That figures," mused Ray.

Nhroma smiled and went on. "The 'man' part of their anatomy, however, is covered by a tough reptilian hide. They have a hairless skull that is remarkably humanoid—two eyes, a nose of sorts, a mouth with the kind of teeth one might expect to find in any omnivorous life form, including man. But they are primarily carnivores, not herbivores. The rest of their humanoid upper torso is little more than an enlarged, heavily muscled neck to which two arms with opposed-thumb hands connect. Lungs, heart and digestive organs are all in the "horse" part of their bodies."

"They're hunters, aren't they?" asked Ray.

"Yes. They subsist mainly on the antelope-like forms that roam the prairies. The Centaurs add to that diet by catching small animals and gathering wild roots and other plants that require no cultivation."

"All well and good," said Mary. "But isn't it contrary to the-Planetary Colonization Code of 2207?"

Intelligent life forms whose technology is inferior to our own are not to be exploited or subjected to xenocide."

"Ah," said Nhroma, "there you have the crux of the matter. The Centaurs have not been officially recognized as intelligent. There is some doubt they ever will be. Our current resources and the need for new worlds are such that no matter what the eventual findings prove about the Centaurs, we must go forward with colonization."

"You're saying that colonization will go forward regardless of the harm done to the Centaurs?"

"Now just a minute. That's unfair!" Nhroma retorted. "The Centaurs will be taken care of. Land will be set aside especially for them. The colonial government will see to their welfare."

His listeners appeared skeptical.

"Look, as things are now all that prairie is essentially going to waste. In ten, twelve years it could be feeding thousands. Ultimately it will feed millions. And still the Centaurs will have lands on which to live and hunt. The Bureau has learned from the brutal mistakes of the past."

"But what if the Centaurs don't take kindly to our usurping their lands. What if they should attack us?" persisted Ray.

"Well—in that case, you must defend yourselves, mustn't you?"

THE sun had risen. Runner decided it was time to get the tribe

moving. The raid must follow form; many 'days' travel must be put between themselves and the sacked camp. Further, this area was just about hunted out. They would move north in pursuit of the great herds of leapers that provided his people with the necessities of life. Not only food, but tools, weapons and rude clothing were the legacy of each leaper felled by a warrior of the tribe. Upon the leapers the tribe depended for its very existence. And the leapers, in turn, were dependent upon the wild grasses of the prairie for their lives.

Under Runner's prodding camp was struck and the meager tools and possessions of the tribe were placed on rude travois to be carried to the next settlement. The tribe's nomadic itinerary would follow the movements of the great herds of leapers.

Leaperstalker, one of Runner's lieutenants, was trying to make himself important, dashing about yelling orders, pleading for haste, snapping a length of rawhide at *sharnan* slow to join the ragged line of march. Runner smiled, content to allow his seconds-in-command to whip the people into line—and incur their natural resentment. That was a trick Runner had learned first from his father and then from his elder brother: the chieftain must, in his people's eyes, be the guiding spirit of the tribe; he must be the font of wisdom, of leadership, the dispenser of all good, including food and *sharnan*. Discipline, though, recognized as originating with the chieftain, was meted out by the

members of the council, by Runner's lieutenants.

When all was ready, when the *sharman* had sorted themselves into marching order according to their status within the tribe and the scouts had taken up their positions, Runner-with-the-Wind took his place at the head of the column. He held high his *koro*, the visible badge of his leadership. All the males touched their right fists to their foreheads, reaffirming loyalty to the chieftain. Runner acknowledged the salute, adding his *shar* to his *koro* then lowering both. The tribe moved out.

“SO,” Ray was saying, “I don't think we're in any danger from the Centaurs.”

Taylor put down his coffee cup. “Look, Ray, we're more than nine hundred kilometers from the nearest cholo group.”

“Well, what's your point?”

“Do you know how I've been driving the cholos?”

“Normally in a line about one to two kilometers wide, right?”

“Yes. Obviously it's not compact enough for them to scour each and every square meter of vegetation. But that's not necessary. Given a good toehold, our tough Terran grasses spread out slowly from the cholos' original paths and displace the weaker native grasses.”

“Thank you, Melvin Nhroma.”

“So I'm lecturing—this is important. For the time being I see no reason to change the pattern. But if

we have any run-ins with the Centaurs I want to move the cholos in closer. They won't be as efficient, but you and the dogs can guard them better.”

“I hope your confidence isn't misplaced.”

HIS scouts led Runner to the low bluff overlooking the valley. From his vantage point he could clearly see the paths of destruction the scouts had been unable to stop jabbering about since they had first dashed back to the tribe's makeshift temporary camp. They were pouring out a tale of great strips of *teve* somehow torn from the land.

“What could have done this, Runner?” one of his men asked as all stared unbelievably at the sight.

“I do not know. There is no mention of such a thing in the songs of our forefathers. It is a new calamity.”

“Ah,” someone grunted, “here comes Sharcarrier. He has been down on the valley floor examining this great curse from close up. Perhaps he has seen something we cannot discern from here.”

When at last the young warrior reported to his chieftain, the news was not good. The youth had noticed that the soil, where the *teve* had been stripped away, was not completely bare after all. Instead the shoots of a new and strange form of *teve* could be seen pushing from the ground. Sharcarrier had noticed that ahead

this vegetation seemed less established, while farther behind it was even thicker and more luxuriant than at the spot he had first examined.

"And," Sharcarrrier told Runner-with-the-Wind, "if you follow this strange path back far enough, you come to places where the new *teve* is as thick and heavy as the old was." He paused to gulp for breath. "But even more sinister, this new *teve* spreads like a slow fire through the rest of the *teve* killing it and taking its place on the prairie."

"What of the animals?" questioned Runner.

"There are none."

"But if there is *teve* then surely there must be leapers. And where there are leapers there are *gnur* to hunt them!"

"I don't think the leapers can eat this new *teve*. They have moved away in search of food."

As Runner was digesting this disturbing piece of information another member of the scouting party said, "Then we must move on until we again find the great herds."

"Yes," said Runner-with-the-Wind with sudden vehemence, "but what shall we do if this new *teve* becomes a great blaze that consumes all in its way? The leapers will disappear for lack of food." He paused. "And so shall all who are nourished by the herds."

"You mean the *gnur*?" questioned a youth.

"Yes," answered another. "But not solely the *gnur*."

THE dogs were happy. Littlejohn, Ozma and Mama-san had to remain with the cholos to keep watch but the other six had permission to go hunting on their own. The freedom made them pups again.

"Hah," said Pandora, "is fun to chase antelopes again." The other dogs, moving in a loose pack, agreed.

"Frodo," said Beowulf, "you better stay last. You too fat to catch antelopes."

"Yeah," agreed Grendel. "Frodo's belly drag on ground. Ha ha—"

While Grendel was laughing Frodo suddenly leaped at her, knocking her down with a well-placed shoulder block and giving her a nip on the rump as he did so. "Ha, I not too fat to bite your ass, Grendel." All the other dogs laughed—except Beowulf, who moved further away when Frodo turned to stare in his direction.

The pack trotted on, telling dirty jokes and arguing about who was the most spectacularly endowed with respect to sexual equipment.

"You can talk," said Grendel, "but Littlejohn not little where it counts."

"Ho," said Beowulf. "Mebbe that's why Ray make Littlejohn stay behind—he too tired carrying great weight around to chase antelopes."

"I bet Littlejohn not too tired to chase Ozma or Mama-san," quipped Frodo.

Pandora added to Grendel's pique by saying, "What make you think he have to chase them?"

The snickering had died down by the time Anson, who had gone on ahead to scout, returned.

"Which?" asked Beowulf, seeing the joy in Anson's eyes. "Hide cats or antelopes?"

"Antelopes. Just over hill." His tongue hanging out, Anson continued, "Wind's blowing this way. Ought to catch scent soon as we move closer. Mebbe ten of them in nice, tight group."

"Good," said Sinbad. "We take one same way as usual?"

"Why not?" replied Frodo. "It works."

"So let's go," said Anson, the thrill of the impending chase burning bright in his eyes.

Grendel and Sinbad moved out to the right to flank the unsuspecting antelope. Pandora and Beowulf took the left flank, leaving Anson and Frodo to proceed straight ahead. The two dogs in the center waited for the others to take up their positions, then loped forward slowly. They topped the slight hill, moving toward the antelope through the cover of the high grasses. The antelope continued grazing until the two dogs were nearly on top of them. Then suddenly one of the antelope raised its head and snorted in alarm. Like fragments of a shellburst antelope scattered in every direction, bounding across the plain in great, twisting leaps.

As soon as the antelope broke, Frodo and Anson leaped in pursuit. Frodo flung a brief burst of words in

Anson's direction and the two of them decided on one of the scattering antelope, ignoring the others. They forced it in the direction of Grendel and Sinbad on the right. Just as the antelope reached the grass concealing the pair, they broke from hiding and charged. Flinging itself around in midair, the startled antelope changed direction. Now moving at right angles to the hiding place of Pandora and Beowulf, the antelope was forced again to change its line of flight when they burst across its path. All six dogs were now in pursuit, driving the frantic antelope back and forth among them.

In the mad ecstasy of the chase the dogs were barking furiously, human speech completely forgotten. They were reenacting an ancient ritual of pursuit and death that predated even their ancestors' association with the shambling primate that was to become man.

The terrified antelope would run flat out in what it hoped was the path to safety only to have one of the dogs loom up, teeth bared, forcing it to change direction. Built for speed but not for endurance, the antelope soon began to tire. The dogs closed in. Its tongue lolled grotesquely from the corner of its mouth as it sought some escape from the circle of canines.

Flanks heaving, the antelope stumbled in fatigue and immediately Pandora leaped upon its back. The assault knocked it to the ground. The other dogs were soon tearing and

slashing at its throat. It thrashed and kicked in mindless terror as its life-blood spurted in streams. The felled beast gave one final shudder and its eyes went blank.

There was blood everywhere. The dogs were covered by it; it dripped from their fangs. Sinbad raised his muzzle to the sky and, from deep within his throat, issued an ancient howl—a cry of triumph and a challenge to whomever would dare dispute his prowess as a hunter. Then he joined the others in tearing the antelope to pieces in a glorious orgy of primitive bloodlust.

“**Y**OU saw them leave the body of the leaper?” asked Runner-with-the-Wind.

“Yes. I heard a terrible cry of pain or pleasure and investigated. They were just leaving the body of the leaper when I spotted them. I made certain I stayed downwind of them. They were huge, almost as big as a male *gnur*.”

“And they didn’t eat the leaper’s flesh?”

“No, though they tore its body to pieces. Perhaps they drank its blood.”

“Hmmm. I would see these beasts and the wondrous creatures they guard with my own eyes. Come, let us make plans to test the defenses of these monsters with the rising of the next sun.”

“**A**RE YOU SURE?” Taylor asked Anson.

“Yep. They kept back, but we knowed they watching us.”

“Three hours, you say? We’ve had Centaurs stumble across our path and become curious enough to investigate, but never for such a long period of time. Did they know that you knew they were watching?”

“Hunh? Oh, no, don’t think so.”

“Okay, you’d better get back to your post. I’ll see what Ray has to say about this.”

IV

RUNNER felt that he and his warriors were ready—as ready as they would ever be. Even as he prepared himself to test the defenses of the monsters, he thought about the events of last evening . . .

Runner had watched the seer throw the leaper bones three times. “Well?” he had asked the man of magic.

“The spirits say the signs are good.”

“Yes—the spirits are already dead and do not have to make the attack. It is easy for them to say the signs are good.”

“Do not speak blasphemy, my son!”

“I try not to, though it is difficult. And I worry. Perhaps the spirits seek company in their land of death—”

Outside the holy one’s hut, Runner’s *sharnan* had gathered to wait for him. “What is this?” he had asked.

“Do not go, Runner,” pleaded

Teffi. "The monsters will devour you all!"

"Have you no faith in the strength of my arm? Besides, you worry too soon. The council has not voted yet."

"You know they will do what you want them to," said Nami.

"A *sharna* should not be so perceptive," Runner replied, smiling. Then: "Hold up my first-born son. I would see him before I enter the council meeting-place."

Only three summers old, the young male was handed gingerly from *sharna* to *sharna* until Runner could cradle the small form in his arms. He hugged the smaller version of himself, then lifted him high in the air and shouted, "My son, my heir! If I do not return, he is the new chieftain!"

The new chieftain had started to wail.

THE CHOLO moved placidly forward, eating, while the Centaurs edged in closer, as yet unnoticed by the dogs.

"It pays us no heed!" said an awed warrior.

"No wonder," replied Runner. "Look, it has no nose, nor eyes—only that great mouth."

"So," said Moon-son. "Let us kill it and stop the evil it does."

"Moon-son is right," agreed Runner. "We must use our *shars* on this beast."

At that the warriors, *shars* poised to strike, moved in and surrounded the cholo.

Runner chose a flank. "Die, monster!" he shouted as he plunged home his *shar*. Immediately the others began thrusting their short *shars* into the body of the great *teve-eater*.

Reacting to pain unlike any it had ever felt before, the cholo shuddered and tried to escape by charging forward.

Moon-son, caught unaware by the beast's sudden spurt of speed, tried to get out of its path. Too late—the huge creature lunged forward in fear and pain, knocking Moon-son off his feet. Screaming, Moon-son tried to get up. Before he could, the entire front of the cholo came down on him like a dark shadow and abruptly cut off his scream.

"God of the Winds!" shouted a shocked warrior.

"Keep thrusting!" Runner ordered.

The cholo bellowed and tried to flip over to its back but lacked the strength. Still, only after hundreds of blows had been struck did the creature die.

"We did it!" shouted the warriors at last, realizing the *teve-eater* finally was dead.

But there was no time for rejoicing. Growls and barks of anger and challenge reached them.

"The leaper killers!" shouted Runner. "Prepare for the attack!"

The warriors formed a rude circle, faced outward. Not a moment too soon—the leaper killers were already on them.

It quickly became clear to Runner that he and his men could not conquer these snarling, darting shapes. The beasts rushed in, slashed at Runner's men with their fangs while adroitly avoiding the thrusts of the *shars*, then backed off for another rush.

Yet the contest appeared a stand-off. No one on either side would be able to inflict any serious wounds without risking death.

Runner did what he thought best. "Quickly, let us retreat!" His men wheeled and galloped across the plains.

The leaper killers tried to follow but were unable to maintain the speed of Runner's warriors.

When it appeared they had safely outrun their pursuers, Runner dared slow down and turn back to look. He glimpsed one of the two-legged beings among the leaper killers. The strange being was pointing something in his direction. Suddenly a mound of soil to Runner's right burst into a hundred bits. This was followed by a loud report from the direction of the two-legged one. Runner urged his men to more speed.

When they reached camp, it became a scene of jubilation. The warriors were welcomed back as heroes, as mortals bold enough to battle monsters and emerge unscathed and victorious. Runner's *shaman* and children swarmed about him ecstatically. The older children clamored for his attention while the younger were pushed forward to be

taken and held by him for a few seconds. It was as if to touch him were to touch someone godlike: his *shar*, his whistler, his *koro*, all were touched, stroked, grasped briefly. His wives kicked and shoved each other to be near him, ignoring all pretense of status order. It was the same with the rest of the tribe. The only ones not celebrating were the people of Moon-son's hut.

"Moon-son died a warrior's death," Runner told them. "Rejoice. He has joined the ancient heroes sung in the songs of the tribe."

TAYLOR looked at Ray as if he were a stranger. "The dogs say you missed hitting the leader of the Centaurs by a good two meters. I know you're a dead shot, even at that distance. So what happened?"

"I—I don't know. I just couldn't kill him unfairly, I guess."

"Jesus—" Taylor shrugged resignedly.

"**C**OLD, hunh?" Grendel asked Beowulf.

"Yah, but spring coming."

"So are big winds, Ray say."

"And they not make our job easier," Beowulf acknowledged.

Grendel looked down the line of cholos. "Littlejohn coming."

"What is it?" Beowulf asked when Littlejohn reached them.

"Nothing. Ray sent me to see what happening here."

"Things quiet," replied Grendel. "How 'bout you?"

"Same."

"I'm worried up," Beowulf said.

"Oh, why?" asked Littlejohn.

"They be back for sure," said Beowulf, shaking his head. "And there not 'nough of us if bunches attack us."

"Funny," said Littlejohn, "that's what Ray say, too."

THE wind was blowing hard toward the monsters' line of march as Runner's warriors drew up in a circle around him.

"The leaper killers that guard the giant *teve*-eaters will catch our scent. It is borne on the *nav*," Sharcarrier said.

"Is my name not Runner-with-the-Wind?" Runner asked. "The holy man has asked the gods of the *nav* to bless us. Let the leaper killers smell us. It will be too late for them to prevent the holocaust the *nav* will bear to the monsters they protect."

He looked at his warriors. Each carried a firepot, a *shar* and a whistler. "You know the plan. Go." They dispersed to set the *teve* aflame.

"I SMELL them, too," said Littlejohn as Mama-san trotted over with a warning. "Something up. Tell Ray."

Mama-san had not gone ten paces before she heard Littlejohn cry, "Fire!"

She turned to see a wall of flame rushing down on them like a tidal wave.

The cholos had to be turned or they would head right into the fire. By the time they sensed the flame it would be upon them. They would have no chance at all.

The dogs leaped into action. Dashing in close to the cholos, they started the beasts turning away from the blaze. There was a small chance such tactics could save creatures . . .

In the van Taylor was first to notice the flames. "I'd better get this heap moving!" He slipped into the control couch. "The dogs will start turning the cholos on their own and Ray has the hover-scooter."

"All right," said Mary. "I'll batten down any loose material."

"DAMN it!" Ray shouted into the wind as he stood between the cholos and the van and watched the fire sweep closer to the beasts.

He climbed onto his scooter and dashed about, shouting orders at the dogs.

There was enough smoke to obscure visibility beyond forty or fifty meters. Ray failed, in the confusion, to consciously note the distant figures moving through the smoke like shapes flowing across a dream-cape.

Aware now that something was wrong, the cholos felt the first tentative touch of heat from the flames and started to move faster. They were no longer eating—they were moving away from a danger they as yet could recognize only as something to be feared.

Suddenly a jagged streak of lightning tore across the darkening sky, followed by a hollow clap of thunder. The wind turned back on itself momentarily. The tidal wave of flame was checked as if by an invisible dam. Then the dam was breached in several places as the wind revived, sucking up parts of the fire and hurling them forward among virgin grasses.

One of the slower cholos was overtaken and enveloped by a sheet of flame. Ray heard an incredibly deep rumble of sheer terror tear from the trapped cholo—the first sound he had ever heard a cholo utter. The cholo's pulpy body sizzled and popped like that of a fat and juicy caterpillar in a campfire. The doomed creature writhed in an agonizing dance of death.

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" Ray moaned, turning away. The smell of burned cholo flesh resembled that of charred rubber. It reached his nostrils as he wheeled his scooter and joined the other cholos in their mad retreat from the fiery onslaught. He gagged but kept driving.

The dogs were all around him now. The cholos, in full flight, needed no more urging to run from the fire.

"C'mon, Ray," Beowulf shouted at him.

"I'm coming, but I want to stay as close as possible to the cholos. You fellows are faster than the cholos. Get ahead where it's safe."

"Okay, Ray. Good luck!"

Backs rippling, the cholos raced across the plain. The dogs had pinched them in toward a common center and occasionally they would collide with and rebound from each other as they ran before the wind's hot breath.

Small animals and an occasional antelope and hide cat could be seen among the cholos and dogs. No species paid any attention to any other: the fire was common enemy to all.

"IT'S no use," Taylor told Mary. "We can't outrace the fire. I remember a deep ravine about two kilometers ahead—I'm going to make for the bottom. There's little growing there to burn and I'm almost certain the van can survive the heat when the fire leaps over us."

"It sounds good. I only hope that Ray is safe."

RAY saw the van disappear into the ravine and waited for it to climb out the other side. When it did not reappear he panicked for an instant, imagining the van was stuck at the bottom. Then he hit upon Taylor's probable plan and approved its soundness.

He refused to look back. He could hear, even above the roaring of the fire, the death rumbles of the cholos.

Soon he was at the ravine. He bounced over the lip and guided the scooter down the steep side of the wall in a kind of controlled skid. He hit bottom and almost lost the

scooter but managed to keep it upright by sheer muscle.

He intended to linger in the ravine no longer than it would take for him to be sure both Mary and Taylor were uninjured. He passed slowly in front of the windscreen, waving madly when the two faces from inside pressed up against it. Then the scooter lurched as he applied power. He was climbing the other side of the ravine, not nearly as steep as the side he had descended, when something about the van's position occurred to him. The cholos . . .

He turned just in time to see one of the beasts hesitate at the lip of the ravine then press forward as a tongue of flame licked at it. It tried to inch its way down but quickly lost traction on the loose soil of the steep slope and skidded sidewise. The cholo hit a small outcropping of rocks, flipped, began to roll. It careened to the ravine's floor and smashed into the rear of the van with tremendous force. The cholo's impact slewed the rear of the van around drunkenly; the vehicle struck the opposite wall of the ravine and overturned. All communication antennas were shorn off.

There was nothing Ray could do at the moment. Other cholos were braving the ravine at various points along its length. The fire was right behind them. He had to get away, praying that Taylor and Mary had survived the awful collision.

In seconds the flames had reached the ravine and leaped across it, borne

by the gusting wind. Ray and the few surviving cholos ran before it.

Again and again lightning crackled across the sky, now the hue of dusk. The wind began to blow erratically. At last heavy drops of water, each the size of a small stone, began to fall. It was as if the gods were weeping for the lost cholos. -

The rain fell faster. The wind shifted, blowing the fire back towards the devastated earth it had just swept bare of all life. A victim of its own voracious appetite, the fire now had nothing to sustain it and began to collapse inward on itself.

Ray looked about for the dogs. He could see only one or two. The others, he assumed, were probably trying to run down and halt the still fleeing cholos that had survived the fire.

He was turning the scooter to head back toward the ravine when he heard the sound of hoofs.

ANSON saw the Centaurs rushing in on Ray and reacted instantly. As he bounded across the prairie he saw a bolo-like throwing weapon knock Ray from the scooter. The sight infuriated him. Now he gave no thought to his own safety—a *man* had been attacked!

His assault was so swift, so silent, that they were unaware of it. He was in the air, fangs bared, when the target Centaur finally turned in alarm, exposing his throat to Anson.

Screaming a battle cry only at the last instant, Anson felt his teeth tear

deeply into the Centaur's throat. Blood filled his mouth and gushed between his teeth.

Knowing the wound he had inflicted was fatal, Anson charged a second Centaur. By this time the others were aware that death was among them. Anson no sooner had his fangs in his second victim's throat than he felt the first spear enter his back. Its only effect was to make him bite down harder, the better to force the life out of this bedamned creature that had dared attack his master. More spears pierced his body. He felt his jaws release his mortally wounded prey.

"I have obeyed the law!" Anson howled as the leader of the Centaurs drove a final spear through the scout dog's heart.

"PLEASE hurry. I can't stand it!"

"I'll just be a few seconds more," Taylor promised. "There." He stepped back from the side of the convulsively heaving cholo with an odd sense of achievement. "The charge is implanted. Let's get back now."

Mary followed him to the overturned van. He picked up a small black box and took one last look at the suffering cholo. It was the same one that had disabled the van. The beast was burned terribly and beyond recovery. Taylor was about to help it in the only way he knew.

"Here we go," he said as he pressed the firing stud. The dying

cholo seemed to rise several feet into the air as if by levitation. Then a loud whoomp reached their ears and the huge creature broke apart raggedly at its middle.

"Thank Zen," murmured Mary.

"That's just one. We've got twenty-four more to worry about—and nine dogs and one Ray."

"Let's get started."

Taylor followed her to the top of the ravine. The view was not especially pretty. Across the gulf, in the direction from which they had come, the land lay scorched and raw. Wisps of smoke still rose from the fire-blackened soil. Tiny flames flickered, hissing as they tried unsuccessfully to embrace unburned patches of grass still heavy with water from the brief but furious cloudburst that had doused the blaze. Dotted obscenely across the hellish landscape were the charred remains of more than half a dozen of the cholos—losers in the race against wind-driven flames. The cooked flesh still popped and split, oozing a colorless mucus that made the cholos resemble glistening slugs emergent upon a wasted abdomen after journeying through moist entrails.

Mary gagged, dropped to her knees and vomited in convulsive heaves.

Taylor bent, stroked her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, sure!" she snapped back. "Never better." She dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a handkerchief.

"You're going to lie down a

while," Taylor ordered. He helped her up. They scrambled back to the van.

Wind whistled through the shattered windows. New Kansas seemed a hopelessly long way from Earth. The night's incoming tide of darkness flowed silently across the prairie and they felt weirdly alone.

TAYLOR patted the small mound a few last times with his shovel and stepped back.

He felt awkward as usual with the dogs and uncertain about how to begin. "I didn't know—ah—Anson all that well, only through the work he did for us. But based on that alone, I'm well aware of what a fine and loyal member of our crew he was. He recognized his duty and he did it—even at the cost of his life." He smiled wanly. "Anson is one of New Kansas' first colonists. His body will give nourishment to a soil which will one day grow Terran plants."

Beowulf looked up at Taylor, his expressive dog's face lined with sorrow. "Thank you, Taylor." There was a pause. "We want to be 'lone with Anson now, okay?"

"Sure. I understand." Taylor swung the folding shovel to his shoulder and turned back to the camp he and Mary had set up near the van.

The dogs surrounded the small grave and lay down, heads on paws, staring silently at Anson's final resting place. They possessed no telepathic powers but, like all scout dogs, were markedly empathetic to

each other's moods and to subtle shadings of feeling. Their intelligence, artificially augmented, was secondary to their emotions. The idea might seem ludicrous, even distasteful, to someone not acquainted with scout dogs, but it was remarkably easy for a sensitive human to love—almost to be in love with—the dogs he or she worked with.

The pain they experienced now from the loss of Anson was intensified by the fear they felt for the safety of the missing Ray. In a way, Anson's death was easier to deal with—it had a finality to it. But about Ray they did not know how to feel. Hope seesawed with despair. And, though it was in no way deserved, they blamed themselves for the apparent loss of Ray.

Beowulf rose stiff-leggedly to his feet. "Let us recite the Law."

"What is the Law?"

"To stand by man's side, as dogs have always stood."

"What is the Law?"

"To place duty above self, honor above life."

"What is the Law?"

"To allow harm to come to no man, to protect man and his possessions."

"What is the Law?"

"To stand by man's side—as dogs will always stand."

Beowulf looked mournfully at the other dogs, especially Ozma, and added, "Honor be Anson's—'cause he obeyed the Law. Shame be ours—'cause we did not."

Then Beowulf raised his muzzle to the brooding sky and voiced a long, drawn-out wolf's howl of sorrow. One by one the others joined him.

The chill wind took up the mournful cry.

V

RUNNER had never had a slave before, so it was with some difficulty that he approached the problem of deciding just what to do with the two-legged one. There was the question of how to guard him adequately, too. Actually that task was made simpler by several factors. First, the slave seemed unaggressive—was “he” perhaps a female—and unlikely to attempt to harm any of the *shaman* or children? Further, the slave was unaware of where he was and any escape he effected could only be an escape to death. Runner thought that no escape at all.

When the slave had first awakened, Runner had decided to permit him to be freed to the extent of wearing a rope collar tied to a post near Runner's hut. After noting that the slave took his meals calmly and peacefully—he ate leaper meat with relish—Runner agreed to Sunchaser's proposal that he be permitted to roam free of the collar while under observation. Sunchaser, as it turned out, kept the slave under her eye most of the day, feeding him and patiently showing him the camp.

Runner was skeptical, but according to Sunchaser the slave quickly

learned the meaning of *nav, sha, shar, sharnon, shaman, teve, gnur* and other common words. The slave seemed quick-witted enough, Runner mused.

THE van had been righted and the antennas crudely repaired by the time the persistent winds reached gale force. Taylor and Mary had rounded up most of the cholos and led them to the shelter of a ridge of low hills. The dogs were still searching for a trace of Ray.

“Vaslev?” Taylor firmly held down the “receive” button as the communicator crackled and hissed. He was rewarded by the tinny-sounding voice of Vaslev Khorsegai, another group leader.

“Yeah, Taylor, what's up?”

“I'm afraid we've had some trouble.” Taylor took a deep breath and described the events of the preceding few days.

“Whew. Sounds bad, Taylor. Just what do you want us to do?”

“I'm not sure—though I know Ray must be found if he's still alive.”

“Well, I can call some of the other groups and see what we can do.”

“Fine. Actually, until the dogs have some idea of where he is, Vaslev, I guess nothing much can be accomplished.

“I know. The Bureau has pretty much left us to our own resources. But we'll do something. We have to band together in the face of any trouble from the Centaurs or we'll go down one by one.”

RAY'S background in anthropology meant much to him during the first few days as a captive. Within hours of waking up a prisoner of the Centaurs he had learned that the chief of this "tribe" was called Solaminov—or "Runner-with-the-Wind"—and that the Centaurs thought of themselves as "the people." As a two-legged monster Ray knew he did not qualify as a real person to them but they were remarkably unhostile.

One of the chieftain's young wives, Sunchaser, had taken his "education" in hand and was responsible for hastening the process of familiarizing him with the Centaur language. With a few root words to build on Ray discovered that the speech patterns of the Centaurs were not so far removed from many of the other "primitive" languages he had studied at the University of Brazil.

Just as Eskimos on Earth had had more than a dozen words to describe the many kinds of snow contained within the framework of their daily lives so, too, did the Centaurs appear to have upward of thirty different forms to describe the various kinds of grasses that might be encountered.

For instance, *mehteve* was "thick grass." *Yoteve* was "tall grass." *Shar-teve* was "cutting grass." *Gnurteve* was "hide-cat grass."

Further, there were more than ten different words describing types of wind in the Centaur vocabulary.

Ray was especially intrigued to learn that the same word that meant wives also meant booty—*shaman*.

He began to talk with Sunchaser as he became more fluent in the Centaur tongue. She learned as much about him as he did about her and her culture.

"Are all your people deformed?" she asked him one day.

"Deformed?"

"You have only two legs."

"Oh. Yes. Though a four-legged man would be the deformed one in my land."

"How strange."

"Yes." Then: "Did you speak to Runner about what I told you?"

"I did."

"And?"

"He says he will not speak with a slave."

"But it may mean the end of your people if you cannot see that we mean you no harm!"

"If you mean us no harm, why do your monsters eat our *teve* and leave only poison behind?"

"There is much land here. We only want to share it with you."

"Runner says you cannot share what is not yours."

At that Ray fell silent.

THE WIND howled constantly and Ray found it difficult to sleep more than ten minutes at a time. Again he shifted position under the rude leaper blanket. Nervously he fingered the knife sheath at his belt. At first he had been incredulous that Runner would permit him to retain his knife, but then this was a society based on honor and honor dictated

that a warrior, even a prisoner, keep his *sha*.

Ray kept imagining that a hide cat—he still could not think of them as *gnurs*—was stealthily creeping up on him but reminded himself constantly that Runner always posted guards. Still . . .

Some time later, he did not know when, he heard a noise. Almost afraid to move, he slowly turned his head.

“Ga-a-a wha-a-a?” asked a pint-sized Centaur. Ray chuckled in relief. It was Runner’s first-born son. Ray knew him well enough—the youngster was fascinated by Ray and followed him everywhere.

“Hey, you’d better get back to your hut before your mom misses you, little Runner.”

“Ka-a-a-a—”

“I said—” Ray stopped short when he saw the large shape materializing out of the night. It was a hide cat. A big one.

“Beat it, kid,” said Ray softly, pulling his knife and stepping in front of the youngster. The hide cat snarled and advanced.

The child, panicked, ran for his hut. His motion attracted the hide cat. Ray swore as the cat started toward the boy.

“Hey! Here!” he shouted, but to no avail. The cat obviously had his mouth set for a Centaur. It studiously ignored Ray.

“Okay, bastard!”

Ray intercepted the cat’s rush and jumped on its back, grabbing one ear

and locking his legs around the cat’s lean body. That caught the cat’s attention, all right—especially when he drove his knife into its throat. The animal leaped straight into the air and landed hard.

Clinging desperately to the cat’s ear Ray simultaneously told himself that he was nuts and that this was no time for pride. “Help!” he yelled at the top of his lungs.

Shapes started pouring from the huts but he had no time to enjoy the results of his cry. He was too busy knifing the cat in neck and shoulder with one hand while hanging on with the other.

The cat changed tactics and whirled suddenly. Ray found himself flying through the air—minus his knife, which remained stuck in the cat’s neck.

This is it, he thought as the cat turned on him, fangs bared. It bunched to spring, then looked puzzled. It was puzzled by the sudden sprouting of a half-dozen spears in its back and sides. The cat made a weak mewling sound and toppled, blood gushing from multiple wounds.

Ray saw Runner staring down at him, looking concerned. “Thanks, Runner,” he said, then passed out.

“**Y**EP,” said Beowulf as he joined Littlejohn downwind of the camp. “Ray in there.”

“Think we ought rush them?” asked Sinbad.

"Oh, sure—and get Ray killed plenty quick," snapped Beowulf. "No, we tell Taylor we found him. Taylor know what to do."

"YOU'VE learned our tongue quickly," Runner said to Ray. The other council members nodded assent.

Ah, yes, Ray told himself, Runner is the only one I need really consider. The others will follow his lead without much question. Aloud he said, "I was trained in my land to do so."

"I see." Runner paused. "I must again thank you for saving my son's life. You could have been killed. Why did you not try to save yourself?"

"I—and my people—mean you no harm. I could not allow a child to die when it was in my power to prevent it."

"I believe what you say. But what of the rest of your people? Can you speak for them?"

"I think so. If you and I can agree to go our ways in peace, will not all our people follow? I am sure they will, for no one wants a useless, wasteful conflict. Is it part of the warrior's code of your people to die for nothing?"

"Of course not. If it is a peace with honor that you offer, then, for my people's sake, I must make a covenant with you. What do your people do to signify an agreement?"

"We grasp hands."

The two did so.

"Good," Runner said. "I will dis-

patch several warriors to guard you on your way back to—"

The Centaur leader was interrupted by the sound of energy rifles.

"What—oh my God!" said Ray. Together he and Runner joined the council members rushing outside.

The camp was in an uproar. Scout dogs dashed from hut to hut, looking for Ray. Men on hoover-scooters, men he did not recognize, were careening through the camp firing at anything that moved.

"No!" he screamed, but saw Gnurkiller fall, his face gone. To his right Littlejohn and Frodo brought down a Centaur and ripped out his throat. Ray rushed in their direction.

Sunchaser was running after him. "Make them stop before it's too late!"

"I'll try." Behind him some of the huts were going up in flames.

As he turned back to the attackers, he heard Ozma shout, "Ray! We'll save you!"

"Wait. I—"

Ozma streaked past him and leaped for Sunchaser. The scout dog, though a female, easily outweighed the slight Centaur and knocked her over on impact.

"No! You don't understand!" Ray screamed hoarsely as he tried to pull Ozma from the frantically jerking body of Sunchaser.

Suddenly he went limp. He'd seen the life go out of Sunchaser's eyes. "Why, why?"

Ozma laughed cruelly. "They kill Anson."

"But she was a female, not a warrior."

"Taylor say kill everyone till save you. Must be taught lesson."

"God—oh, God!" Ray heard two hover-scooters pull up on either side of him. He felt himself grasped under each arm and lifted into the air.

"Don't worry, buddy," a strange voice was saying. "You're safe."

"Yeah—safe."

In that way he was carried away from the camp and returned from savagery to civilization.

THE WIND was still strong though the time of the winds was nearly past. Ray and the dogs walked slowly across the prairie, heading into the wind.

"We're sorry for what we done, Ray."

"It's not your fault, Beowulf."

"Yah, but—"

"No buts."

"Okay. Think they will take you—us—back?"

"I don't know." He smiled grimly. "I suppose you and the others heard the argument I had with Mary and Taylor about what we're doing. I can't blame them. I once believed everything they still believe—that the Centaurs will have lands set aside for them for all time by the Bureau and that the colonists will honor the deal. But 'all time' will give way when the colonists need more room or when something valuable is discovered on the Centaur land. I can't accept that.

I have to try to help them. They need someone on their side who knows what's happening to them."

They were silent after that, each alone with his thoughts as they trudged toward the ruined camp.

Eventually the camp came into view. Ray slowed down the dogs and they walked warily toward the center. When they were within three hundred meters of the camp Ray saw Runner emerge from his hut and stand impassively in front of it.

Ray approached to within fifty meters. Then he stopped and made a great show of letting his energy rifle fall to the ground. Runner remained impassive.

Again Ray started forward, the dogs following at his heels. Finally Ray came to a stop directly in front of Runner. Runner stared into Ray's face, the Centaur's eyes refusing to betray his emotions.

Ray thought of Runner's responsibility to his tribe and hoped he would put its future ahead of personal feelings. But the human could not help thinking of Gnurkiller, of Sunchaser, and of the sorrow Runner must be bearing.

Ray very deliberately raised his right fist to his forehead in a salute, presenting his unprotected chest to Runner. Runner would raise his *shar* either to return the salute or to plunge his weapon into Ray's chest.

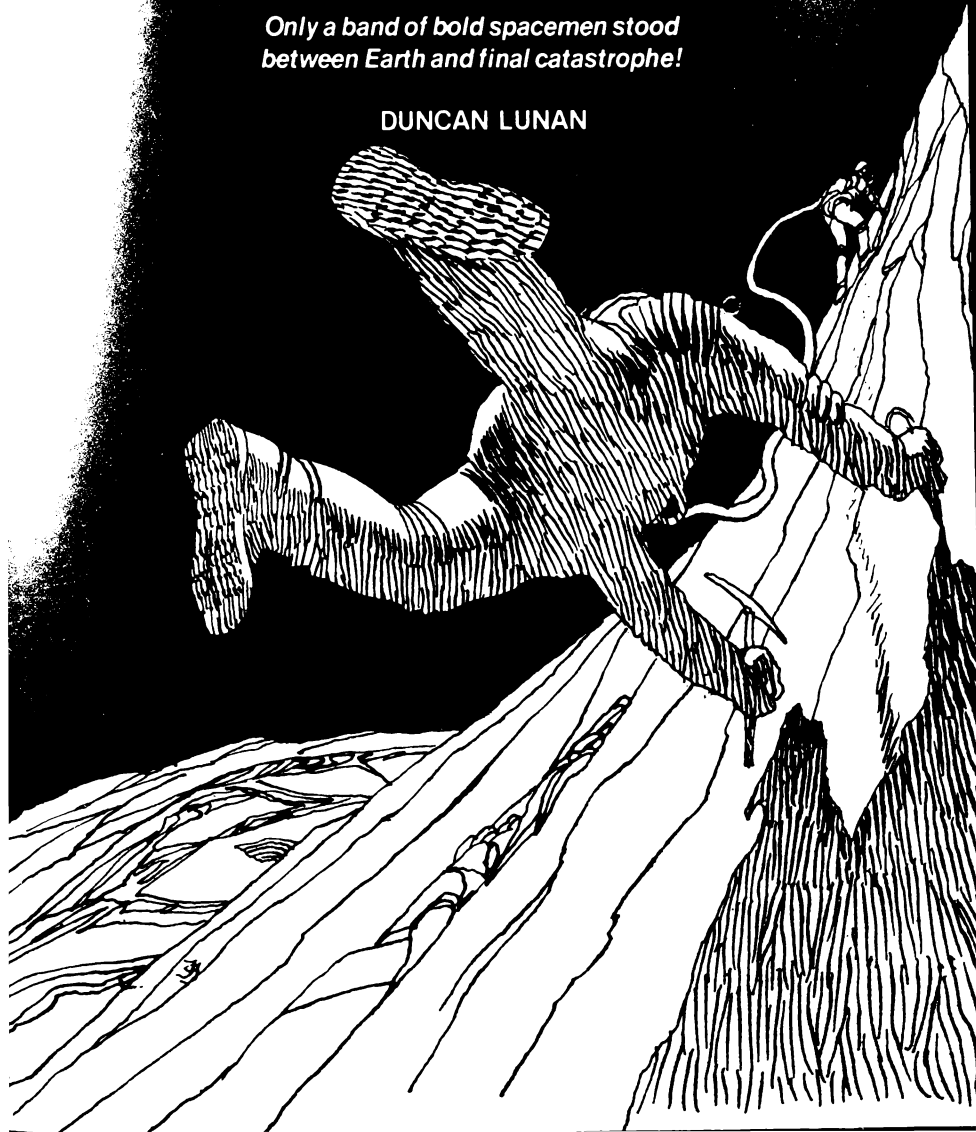
Runner and Ray stared into each other's eyes as the wind blew.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the *shar* moved . . .

HOW TO BLOW UP AN ASTEROID

*Only a band of bold spacemen stood
between Earth and final catastrophe!*

DUNCAN LUNAN



EARTH had been a member of the Interface interstellar civilization for four years. There were things to show for it, including a major spaceport functioning in Montana and a joint Human/Fallaran project thriving on the moons of Jupiter. Not bad, although still the only true spaceship available was a Recovery and Liaison Vehicle left behind by the Sasarenn, reptilian foes of the Interface, dislodged from the Solar System in 2081. It would be many months yet before Earth's prototype starships got airborne.

On the whole those first four years had been quiet, considering that all the member races of the Interface could have descended on the Solar System once the matter-transmitter relays were placed in their various orbits. Yet for McKay, involuntary Planetary Agent since the Sasarenn confrontation, the period had been busy enough and so had passed quickly. Even in human terms, four years is not a long time. In astronomical terms it is negligible.

Of course a year or two later, when Earth would make definite contact with some unscrupulous members of the Interface, McKay was to wonder if the advent of the body designated 2085-JA had been coincidence after all...

He was a long way from the field when the emergency arose. The swift reaction of his team proved that despite its many responsibilities, it still recognized that the RLV was primarily a rescue vehicle.

McKay was walking along a country road when the communications relay implanted in his skull by the Sasarenn handed him the punch in the back of the head. Those punches seemed to get more vicious as he grew older. McKay recovered his breath and pulled out his RLV communicator. "Acknowledge."

He stood motionless, the landscape around him "annihilated" as the perception circuit gave him the read-out from the computer on the orbiting space station. Though he had never stressed the point in public, Interface membership gave Earth some coverage against the random hazards of the Universe—and the hazard now coming in from the stars was one unknown to Earth for geological ages. This McKay learned from the read-out. Immediately he opened a communications channel overriding radio chitchat around the spacefield.

"McKay to all units, absolute priority. RLV team to ship, repeat, RLV team to ship. Divert all traffic away from the field and the Interface corridor. Clear all Committee for Earth's Defense channels for a planetwide alert Go!" He plugged back into the space station and began preparations.

Exactly three minutes later, Slazeck called him from the ship. "We're standing by to lift, Mac, but one of our trainees reported sick this morning. I don't think it's too serious—want me to spring him?"

"Negative," McKay radioed.

"Take off immediately and home on my relay. This one's our biggest emergency ever!"

He returned his perceptions to the station. When he came back to reality the scream of the approaching RLV was all around him. The ship was coming down STOL, wings wide-spread, flaps and gear down. McKay raised the communicator again. "Don't land. Just drop me a line."

"Acknowledge." Slazek was at the controls. He brought the ship to the hover, the hot jets beating down and boxing McKay. A silvery pick-up line spiraled down from the airlock in the underside. McKay slipped into the harness and was winched swiftly aloft. It was a good trick to stay clear of the jetstream and get in this way without banging your head, and McKay wasn't wearing a helmet. But he made it without mishap. Slazek climbed the ship toward the Interface corridor as McKay changed into flight overalls.

Arnold, the Air Force trainee, was with Devlin in the cabin. So too, unexpectedly, was Devlin's wife Cathy. McKay blurted, "What are you doing here?"

"You didn't say this is a contact mission," replied Cathy, hurt. "So I dropped everything and ran for the ship like everyone else."

"Okay. Sorry, Cathy. You'll have to stick with us as far as the satellite—there isn't time to return you to the field." He pulled himself through the hatch into the cockpit, dropping into the copilot's seat.

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"We're in the Interface corridor," Slazek told him, plugging into the computer-autopilot. "Shall I circle while you put out your broadcast?"

"No, hold your climb," said McKay. "We'll put out a global warning from the space station." He contacted the orbital Interface relay and set the controls to place the ship by the station, velocities matched. "Up Interface!"

AHEAD of the ship, spectacular in the perception circuits' all-around vision, a circle of blackness appeared. Half a mile across, two-dimensional, the disk looked into

space six thousand miles up. The jets thrust the RLV into it and died instantly, momentum carrying their last gulp of air out of the exhausts in a cloud of ice crystals. The blue disk astern closed, leaving them in Earth's shadow.

Visible through the forward ports, a giant wheel floated serenely. The space station.

"Twelve minutes from alert to orbit," said Slazeck. "But for picking you up, we'd have done it in six."

"Every second counts," McKay assured him. "Go ahead and dock, Walt, while I start the briefing." His own display told him everyone on board was plugged in. "It's a radar alert, crew. The satellite picked it up and rang all the alarms. Unknown space object. I'm bringing it up now on the display."

"Got it," said Devlin.

"That speck?" Cathy asked carefully, concealing her incredulity.

"That speck' is nearly one-and-a-half million miles out," said McKay. "There's a radar beam locked on it now, but it was first detected on a routine sweep of surrounding space. That's like when the old BMEWS system picked up the moon by accident. To show up at that distance, the thing out there has to be really big. And it's coming our way. It's on a collision course with Earth!"

"You mean it's too big to burn up in the atmosphere?"

"If it's as big as it looks, that object won't even feel the atmosphere," said McKay. "But the atmos-

phere will feel the object, all right. There'll be enough hard radiation from the entry alone to threaten millions of people."

Whatever their personal reactions to that news, the team members conscientiously showed no emotion.

"It could be a mile across," Devlin read from the computer. "A full-grown asteroid—and not one of the Earth-grazers, on that orbit."

"Right. Looks as if it's come from clear outside the solar system—"

"Nosing into the docking collar, Mac," Slazeck reported.

"Okay, we'll continue this conference in the station. Cathy, follow me to the control room. We've got to put out that alert."

By now the international channels were cleared, waiting impatiently to hear the nature of the threat. In the control module of the space station, McKay studied the latest read-outs from its sensory systems. Meanwhile Cathy contacted the U.N. headquarters of the Committee for Earth's Defense. Next, she switched the translators into the circuit for the international broadcast. Then McKay took over and told the world, through its military warning systems, what was coming.

"The impact will be in the western hemisphere, some way north of the equator," he finished. "The exact dimensions and constitution of the asteroid are unknown. Taking the most pessimistic view, the effects of the impact may be disastrous for every nation on Earth. We've sent

out message spheres calling for Fallaran help but warships may not get here in time. All emergency services should be mobilized at once. Preparations must be made for a major catastrophe."

He switched off. The rest of the team was now crowded into the weightless control room of the satellite.

"I've scrambled up the corridor," McKay said, "because it seems to me that we're the only ones who can do anything about this. If anybody can think of a definite, sure-fire plan involving gear or personnel we don't have, we've got just over one hour to do something about it."

No suggestions came up. After a moment Arnold said, "Did I understand you to say eight hours to impact?"

"Eight hours, yes." McKay glanced at his watch. "Nearer seven-and-a-half, now. But to do anything about it we have to get out to the asteroid. It's making more than forty miles a second right now and will be doing nearer fifty by impact. So we can get to it only by Interface—and the range of an Interface relay is ten thousand miles. I've sacrificed one of Earth's three relays for the purpose, hurling it out to meet the asteroid at 300 miles per second, so they'll pass in a little more than an hour. That leaves us only six hours, probably, by the time we get down on the asteroid—but that 300 mps is near an absolute limit in this situation. Much faster, and the relay couldn't hold

the range for the normal thirty seconds' duration of an Interface. Our timing will have to be perfect as it is...this is the narrowest launch slot I ever heard of."

"What can we do when we get there? There's no way to divert a rock like that from Earth, is there?"

"I can't think of one," McKay replied. "If it's a mile across, it's too big to go through an Interface. Somehow we've got to break it up. We won't be able to destroy it but if we can shatter it, the collision will do less damage."

Slazek spoke. "Suppose we can't split it up. Just how bad will the crash be, Mac?"

"I have some assessments from the computer here. As I said, just falling through the atmosphere, that baby can generate enough hard radiation to sterilize a huge area. It could be enough to kill all exposed life in line-of-sight. Adding the effects of the actual impact, the amount of energy that will be let loose, there might be no survivors at all from Paraguay well up into Canada. Beyond that radius there will still be earthquakes and volcanic outbreaks to contend with—and we're talking only about land impact. The crater will go down to the magma whatever happens, but if it's on land a great deal of the released energy will be radiated back into space. If it's in the sea much more energy will be retained in the interaction among the fireball, the crater, the ocean and the atmosphere. Tidal waves will scour

all the low ground in the world. There could be enough water-vapor and solids lifted into the atmosphere to bring back the ice age. And if the damn thing's really massive, coming at this speed, I suppose there's a chance it could break up the Earth's rocky crust altogether."

The picture of total cataclysm drawn by McKay was reflected in the horror stamped on everyone's face, including his own. It was a paralyzing moment.

He was the first to regain control of himself; after all, he had faced planetary disaster before. Slazek and Devlin, responding to their long training and the steely self-command of their chief, managed to pull themselves together. Cathy, so as not to break down her husband, managed to fight back her tears. Only Arnold, the trainee, could not seem to break out of his horrified trance. McKay did not blame him. How awful to contemplate was the possible end of Earth and all its life.

Slazek decided that the silence had to be broken.

"You'd need pretty high density to crack the crust," he growled.

"Oh, sure—I'm just mentioning the worst possibilities I can think of. We don't know yet what the object is made of. I'm hoping it's pretty light. The observations we have from the lunar relay suggest it has a high albedo on parts of its surface. If what we have is a loose ball of ice and pumice out of some comet, it's much less of a threat."

"And we could break up something like that?"

"Quite likely. Two of our missiles have nuclear warheads. I'm wondering about taking more along, but that would crowd out our rescue equipment. I think we should keep the stuff aboard in case we have to make a landing."

Slazek nodded. "Unless the thing's really fragile, we'll have to plant our charges below the surface."

"That's what I have in mind. The RLV's carrying cutting tools as well as explosives for use with the rescue systems. I think we've got to save the world with what's aboard right now."

Cathy had blown her nose a couple of times. She decided she could trust her voice.

"So you're going out through Interface, to ride the asteroid back in?"

"That's it, Cathy. Of course we'll have to use Interface to get off again."

"Why did you stop at this satellite, chief?"

"To get a look at the main computers. To get ourselves a few minutes of conference before we committed the ship to deep space. And mostly, Cathy, to deposit you. You'll be safer here."

"But you'll be gone only a few hours," she said. "Not long enough for me to get in your way. It sounds as if I ought to go with you. Look, you'll need coffee."

"Hell's bells—" McKay began.

"Chief, you know I make a mean cup of coffee," the girl wheedled.

McKay's attention seemed elsewhere, just for a second, as if he had plugged into the perception circuits. "All right," he said, snapping out of it. "You can come. Let's get back to the ship. Walt, you help me put these controls back on automatic."

As they too were leaving, Slazek shook his head grimly.

"A mean cup of coffee?"

"Just a thought, Walt," McKay said. "True, I don't like to take Cathy into space, even for liaison missions. But there's a finite chance that the object will be dense enough, formed outside the solar system as it was, to churn up the whole crust of Earth with shockwaves. If that's going to happen we have to save at least one woman—and there aren't any girls on the Jupiter project."

"We'd probably decide not to continue the human race."

"Even so, Cathy should be saved for Devlin—and I'm glad, Walt, that the rest of us are bachelors."

II

THE connecting tunnel to the docking boom was withdrawn, the lock door closed. The RLV backed out of the tangential collar into the glory of the sunrise. Slowly, as the white sun separated from the planet, the ship drew away and turned into the plane of the orbit.

McKay fed the parameters for the Interface into the computer well in

advance. When the time came the link would be set up automatically.

The last few minutes seemed eternal. Nobody could forget that once they reached the asteroid, time would be desperately short. But at last came the thirty-second warning.

"Activate," ordered McKay.

The display traced the outline of the Interface ahead. The chemical motors fired, thrusting the RLV smoothly through the invisible disk. There was no change in attitude. The stars did not move. But the Earth disappeared and came back as a distant blue-green crescent. The moon flicked across the heavens, shrinking and changing phase. And out of nowhere, looming like a shape from a nightmare, came 2085-JA.

There was a pause of two or three seconds during which the Interface closed again. The relay hurtled on out of range, and the RLV's parabola swung round and locked on Earth. McKay took observations and readings for at least three minutes. Then he cleared his throat and broadcast his description to the waiting planet.

"It could be worse, but not by much. Nickel-iron. Roughly spherical, though there's a pronounced ridge like a shoulder on the side nearest us. It's overlaid with ice in ridges and peaks, an intricate pattern that looks built up by accretion. It has little or no rotation relative to the sun, so there's a big clear patch on that side of it. The patch is black and glistening. Looks pretty solid. Around it the ice ridges facing the

sun are vaporizing, so the asteroid is dragging a faint cometary tail—very faint. We're going to take stock of what we can do, now that we see the thing."

Another pause, not all due to the time lag between the asteroid and Earth.

At last the voice of Earth came back. "RLV, can you estimate the size of the body?"

"Approximately one mile in diameter," said McKay. "Likely a core fragment from some split planet. It must mass billions of tons."

The Earth authorities did not reply. Confirmation of their fears, apparently, had stunned them.

"Well," said Slazek suddenly, "we're coming down toward six hours to impact. I take it we're going to sink charges?"

"Right," said McKay. "But where? That clear patch looks big enough for a good spread of microphones. If we can pass seismic shocks through it and triangulate, maybe the computer can trace the asteroid's inner structure. From that we can calculate the best charge locations. Walt, suit up and we'll put you down there. You too, Dev."

The RLV being designed as a rescue ship, its g-couches were exceptionally versatile. With acceleration shielding closed around them, they could be separated from the ship's life-support and passed out through the side hatches as air-cushion sleds or stretchers. In space, they could serve well for ship-to-ship transfers,

so why not for ship-to-asteroid transfers?

As McKay was edging the ship toward the black patch on the sunward side of the asteroid Slazek and Devlin put on their suits and broke out the microphone equipment. They opened the lock, and he guided two sleds down the hull to them.

"You'll need the sleds to land in this gravity. It's low enough to be deceptive—about 0.001-g. I'm keeping the ship well out till we pick a touchdown site, so you've got the honor of making the first landing on the beast. Ready?"

"Affirmative."

To save time, the two were taking along explosives and one big nuclear warhead. Festooned with equipment, the two cockleshells drew away from the ship, wending slowly and carefully down to meet their shadows on the shiny surface.

"You're right about this gravity, Mac," Devlin reported over his radio as they began to unload. "Things bounce right up. You grab above them because you think they're weightless."

Looking down from a safe distance, McKay could see their difficulty. On almost every step they rose off the surface and had to wait for gravity to pull them back.

"Suggest you stockpile your equipment right there, Walt. Then you can use the sleds to pay out the microphone cables. We're down to five hours thirty..."

"Will do, Mack."

McKay watched until the first two mikes were in position.

"For once, we could really use magnetic-soled boots," Slazek reported.

"We'll make a note for the next time this happens, maybe in a few hundred megayears. While you're putting out the third mike, Walt, I'll move the ship to the far side of the asteroid. I'll throw a communications relay halfway around so we can still hear each other."

"Roger, we copy."

SMILING at the old-fashioned phrase, McKay turned the ship. He was still holding the RLV well out from the asteroid in order not to be snared by the tug of its mass. He knew by experience not to mistake low gravity for no gravity. It might almost be easier to get an orbit around the thing, he thought, as he edged the ship along the icy bulk. In fact, Arnold suggested just that.

"No. One burst on the attitude control jets could slam us right into it, if I went that close."

At the halfway mark McKay launched the com repeater, nudging it gently outward at just over escape velocity. Above the dark side, setting the autopilot to compensate for the coming recoil, he deployed the guns above and below the hull.

Reflections of the muzzle flashes could just be seen in the dark ice. "Firing one...firing two...firing three...firing four..." The shells burst inadequately on the asteroid,

suddenly giving scale to its bulk. Chips of ice flew and cracks radiated, but the overall effect was negligible.

"Doesn't look like enough," McKay said to Arnold.

"I remember an Air Force attempt to bomb an iceberg, sir," said the trainee. "Ice can absorb a lot of explosive energy. And it's the metal underlying it that's our real problem."

A few moments later Devlin reported. The microphones had picked up vibrations generated by the shells. But the tremors had been too weak to reveal anything about the asteroid's structure.

"I'm going to try a missile," McKay announced. "Better hope it works. We've only got four."

The missile bay had been left open after the withdrawal of the first nuclear warhead. McKay rolled the ship a quarter-turn and fired one of the conventional-warhead missiles.

It streaked toward the asteroid, picking up speed fast, and made a satisfying explosion. Clearly it had penetrated the ice. This time Slazek and Devlin reported a definite shock underfoot, enough to lift them off the surface for a second, and the computer went into its analysis program.

Numbers and geometrical figures danced on the color display, dissolving to a 3-D rotating model of the asteroid's interior. Stress lines were defined. McKay guessed that maybe it had been liberated from its planet of origin by the impact of some

similar wanderer; such was its density, it must have been under great heat and pressure. The ice must have formed over it in space, perhaps by accretion over billions of years, or from water vaporized by the original cataclysm.

The computer pushed straight on to plot the asteroid's destruction. The first solution, a hundred percent certain, involved placing both nuclear warheads near the center. The apparatus kept calculating possible locations. McKay shut it off when it pinpointed two spots respectively ten and fifteen feet below the surface.

"We'll try to make that one," he announced. "We're down to only forty percent probability of success, but that's about the best we can do." Over the radio he explained the plan to the two team members on the surface.

"Right," answered Slazek, from the far side. "Looks like our best bet. What it amounts to is that we'll be relying more on resonance than on the force of the bombs. Want us to take the shaft nearest us?"

"Affirmative. The computer indicates that you should sink it on the edge of that clear patch. So you won't have problems clearing ice. You can go straight down, which will make it easier for you to blast out. We'll need the ship's equipment for the hole on this side."

"Okay, we'd better get started. Not much more than five hours to go, now."

"Check."

McKay got the ship under way again, maneuvering it painstakingly toward the touchdown site.

"The shaft will have to go in there, below that shoulder ridge. We want to get the charge right in under the ridge if we can."

"I'm going to burn some of it off," said McKay. He dropped lower. Close up, the ice cover looked a nightmare to land on. He was bringing the ship down slowly, turning into the tail-first attitude necessary for eventual touchdown.

"Primary boost, three-second warning—we won't need the shields."

"Check," said Arnold. He gripped the handholds.

As the ship neared the jagged surface, McKay fired the fusion sustainer motor. A short burst was enough to cancel velocity and push the RLV away again. The blue flames sank through the ice, splashing on the hard metal below. A hemisphere of glowing haze grew up and dispersed into vacuum.

"That should do it," said McKay, when the gases cleared. "We've burned down those surface ice ridges. They were worrying me—looked too insubstantial to land on. And we've cleared off most of the ice film over the metal shoulder. I'll put her down this time."

He turned through 180 degrees in the pitch axis, fired the motor to cancel their outward coast, and turned back again for the tail-first approach. He was maneuvering quickly now. Slazek and Devlin

were hard at work on their site, the precious minutes ticking away, and Arnold and McKay had not even reached theirs yet. He extended the tail blocks and eased down on the chemical motors, firing out lines from the blocks to anchor the ship to the surrounding ice. The blocks touched and their stabilizer booms snapped out. McKay cut the idling rockets.

"Nice landing, sir," gasped Arnold.

"Let's go, lieutenant," McKay replied shortly, unfastening his straps. He could not say quite why he was irritated; though he was still nominally in the USAF, with NASA, relations with his former colleagues had been strained since the Sasarenn confrontation. He led the way through what was now the floor hatch. With Arnold, he paused in the main cabin.

III

KATHY had unstrapped from what was now the upper couch. Looking cute as a button in her brief space-skirt and scarlet body-stocking, she eyed the vacuum pot in its horizontal niche.

"Not much time for coffee at the moment," McKay said as he passed her. "We'll be panting for it when the job is over, though."

"Good luck, Mac." She smiled at him.

McKay dropped from the floor, normally the rear wall, through the airlock hatch. "We'll go out sepa-

ately," he told Arnold. "When the ship's upright, there isn't room for both to suit up in the lock." Closing the hatch overhead, he got into his own suit as fast as possible, depressurized, and opened the outer door.

Another difficulty. He had never had to leave the ship in this attitude, though Slazeck had done it on one of the Jupiter missions. Ordinarily he would be standing on the outer door, which would become a ramp lowering him to the ground. In this case the door swung up overhead, and the ground was far below. Normally the couch-sled units swung from vertical to horizontal and deployed from the rescue hatches to the ground; here the units came out vertical, and had to be lowered to the lock. Arnold took care of that from the inside while McKay extended the normal rear bulkhead as a platform and pulled the sled over on to it.

He cast off the lines, climbed on the sled and lifted off from the platform. Foreseeing these difficulties, Slazeck had separated both nuclear warheads from their missiles. All McKay had to do was transfer the second one's lines to the sled, but even that needed the limbs of an octopus. He had to lock the sled's controls, keeping it hovering unsteadily on short blasts of the air jets, while he held the edge of the missile bay with one hand and unhooked the lines with the other.

Anyone with no zero-g experience would involuntarily have pushed the sled away with his feet. McKay

avoided that trap but hooking the lines to the sled took both hands, and he nearly overturned. Once it was hooked, to ease the warhead out of the bay on the end of the lines was child's play. Which was lucky, since his heart-rate and oxygen consumption were far too high so far. With the nuclear device penduluming below him, McKay began the descent to the base of the metal ridge. By now Arnold was in his suit and coming out of the lock.

McKay lowered the warhead delicately, brought the sled down beside it. Then he spoke into his throat mike. "We're going to need lights, lieutenant. Can you bring them down this trip, or should I come back up?"

"I don't think I could pay out both sets of cables at one time," said Arnold. "I'd sooner you come up and give me some guidance."

"Will do." McKay was becoming engrossed in the job now, though the need for haste was never forgotten. He left the warhead and lifted the sled back across to the ship, up toward the open lock. They had been able to do something like this on Io, though in its Earth-normal gravity it had been better to ground the sleds and winch them aboard when the RLV was upright.

Arnold was loading his sled with explosives and the heavy-duty laser intended for cutting into wrecked hulls. Jockeying in as Arnold floated out, McKay paid the power line out to the laser by hand until it was well clear of the hull. Then he broke out

their big rescue lights from the equipment bay, loaded them on his own sled.

At the base of the ridge, the commander and the trainee got the lights set up. The metal surface, still slippery with ice patches, was treacherous in the low gravity. As Slazek had indicated, the asteroid's pull was just enough to spoil coordination. To save time in the long run every movement had to be absurdly slow—helpless floating could mean only worse delay. The intense concentration required was beneficial, though. To a degree the work diverted the minds of the two from the awesome disaster that threatened. Otherwise Arnold and possibly McKay himself might have succumbed to panic. They took the laser from its sling, mounting it in the nose of the sled that had brought it down. Before letting fly, McKay called Slazek.

"We're way ahead of you," Slazek reported. "Four feet down, and starting to set our third charge. Rush it, Mac. Only four hours to go."

"We'll catch up with you, using the laser," McKay promised. There would be no recoil from it.

Devlin was working with a hand drill powered from the sled, bracing himself with his EVA jetpack. At their end McKay and Arnold lined up their own sled on the intended shaft. They triggered, held steady. In the near-vacuum of space the laser beam was invisible, but a glowing hole appeared in the ridge. McKay cut off the beam. The hole swiftly cooled.

The projecting core of the shaped charge fitted neatly into the orifice made by the laser at that focus. McKay twisted off the detonator cap, and he and Arnold withdrew with the sled. He pulled up the plunger from the cap, rotated it ninety degrees, thrust it down again. There was no sound, but icicles which had formed on the fringe of the laser-blast shattered again. No cloud hung after the detonation. Gases had dispersed into vacuum, dust and fragments had flown out at above escape velocity. There was now a satisfying pit in the black metallic ridge, beginning the slanting shaft they had to drive for fifteen feet.

This time the sled had to be positioned more carefully, to beam along the axis now established. After lasering, and using the suit maneuvering pack, McKay turned himself head-first into the pit to plant the second charge and arm it. They had to clip a communications repeater at the lip of the hole, and again draw the sled back with them before firing the charge. Another soundless blast. Then back again, to plant another charge.

Align the sled...avert eyes...fire laser...plant charge, arm it...withdraw...detonate. Thus was the shaft battered into the metallic bulk of the asteroid. If it had not been necessary for a fully suited man to go down the shaft each time, the charges could have been set to blast a narrower, deeper hole. But the Sasarenn de-

signers had not envisaged this particular situation. McKay marveled that their systems could be adapted to it at all.

Another precious hour passed. Three hours to impact, and the shaft was only halfway to the required depth. Fatigue was slowing the pair as well as causing mistakes in coordination. McKay fumbled with one of the charges, sending it tumbling away from him. If it had not bounced toward Arnold, who fielded it successfully, it would have gone irretrievably out over the ice ridges before falling. At that point McKay ordered five minutes' rest.

"Wish we had some of that coffee down here, Cathy," he said wearily to the ship.

"I'm keeping it hot," Cathy replied. "Mac, if you have time, the boss wants to talk to you from Earth."

"Sure, put him on. Hello, Lang. Can you hear me?"

The time-lag was much less now. Lang's familiar voice arrived soon enough. "How's it going, pal?"

"Our shaft is about half sunk," said McKay. "Walt and Dev are down more than that. But we'll catch up to them. While theirs is an easier, shallower shaft to make, they have more trouble drilling."

"Not too bad, though. Doesn't sound hopeless—"

"Hell, no. We'll get the warheads placed," McKay promised. "Of course, what will happen after that is anybody's guess."

"You guys will make it for us, Mac. Billions down here are cheering you on."

"Any panic?"

"None reported anywhere, strangely. Mac, you never saw anything like it. The whole world is swiftly organizing for crisis. Whole populations are trekking to higher ground to escape tidal waves. Say it's cut down to a rain of fragments on South America—there will be immediate worldwide response. Supplies, equipment, teams on standby all over the globe will be converging on the affected areas. Some teams from the U.S. and South American countries have already flown into Caracas, to be there when the crunch comes. They've volunteered to be right on the scene, assuming you shatter the asteroid and there will still be a scene."

McKay took a deep breath.

"Thanks, Lang," he said slowly. "You make me feel better. What you've been telling me is that if mankind has to go down, it will go down fighting. And maybe it won't have to go down. Tell the world we'll do our level best, for everybody."

He turned again to the draining, repetitive task of drilling. For a moment, he was thinking, the stars overhead had seemed close enough to touch.

DURING the latter stages Earth majestically rose over the metallic horizon, more because of the planet's increase in apparent di-

ameter than the asteroid's slight rotation. Soft blue light crept between the sharp yellow ovals cast by the work lamps, throwing the tumbled ice around them into relief. Earth looked incredibly beautiful, rendering still more tragic the ruin approaching. They were crossing the moon's orbit now, an hour and a half from impact. But the final charge was in place. At a safe distance from the shaft, McKay pulled up still another trigger, twisted it and thrust it down. By now the shock waves were taking appreciably longer to reach them.

Once again they maneuvered the laser sled back to the shaft. McKay had been making marks on the side every three feet as they had blasted down. The gap below the fourth mark looked adequate.

"I think that does it, lieutenant."

"Looks like it, sir. But can we get that warhead down here? And how can we load it in?"

"We'll hook it to my sled again. Then we'll set up the timing mechanism, and lower the warhead and the sled on the same lines, using the laser sled as a belay. It's going to take a while, so let's get to it."

Precious minutes passed while the rig was readied. The warhead went down first, the lines from McKay's sled passing to Arnold's and down the shaft to the charge. When they went slack McKay guided his sled into the shaft, following it down to connect up the power cable. Arnold

was taking the strain with his sled, holding McKay's near the foot of the shaft.

"Okay, send down the foam." The canister came down on a hand-line. McKay pushed himself back a few feet and sprayed the foot of the shaft with the acceleration foam used in the RLV cabin when a rescue gave them more passengers than g-couches. He worked back, spraying, until the warhead and the sled were fixed in place. Then Arnold dropped the lines, and McKay backed to the surface for the last time.

"We're sealing our shaft, Walt," he radioed. "Where do you stand?"

"Not too far behind," came the reply, from Devlin this time. "We're rigging the sleds to lower our warhead now."

"Check," said McKay.

He and Arnold sprayed their remaining canisters of foam into the shaft, anchoring the last cable to the wall, and finally McKay connected the antenna that would activate the timer.

"Seventy minutes to go," he said. "I'm glad that in this low gravity one sled can lift us both. The laser, too." They unshipped the laser and placed it back in the sling. McKay gripped the sled, and Arnold lifted all toward the airlock, up the smooth underside of the RLV standing on its tail in the blue Earthlight.

With profound relief, they shed their suits and climbed through the main cabin straight up to the cockpit.

There they found Cathy, her eyes anxiously following the perception displays. No one mentioned coffee. Her husband was still far from the ship, along with Slazeck.

Then Slazeck's voice suddenly burst from the com speakers. He announced triumphantly that the other warhead was in position and wired up. At fifty-two minutes to impact, he and Devlin were finished at their site and about to start back on their shared sled.

McKay switched in the master communicator and passed the news.

"Wonderful, Mac!" Lang responded. "For the last hour there's been direct coverage from here to just about every radio and TV station in the world. I guess the biggest collective sigh in history just went up. You've done a great job, all of you up there. Mankind thanks you."

"I hope the result will be worth the effort," McKay said. He was relaxing in the form-fitting couch, content just to lie there until it was time to take off. When the antennae activated the timers, they would have two minutes to get away from the asteroid. That would have to be on full secondary boost, since there were no Interface relays within range. So he would raise ship and align it for the getaway before he told the computer to activate. The maneuver would begin the instant the others were back.

"Slazeck to RLV, come in please. We have a problem."

Arnold stiffened on his couch.

Cathy, fortunately, had returned to the main cabin. McKay jumped up and grabbed the panel mike.

"What's wrong, Walt?"

"We have a complete power failure on the sled. I repeat, complete power failure."

"Report your location, Walt."

"We're about a mile from the ship but floating down. Hitting the ice shouldn't hurt us. We're only about seventy feet up, and there's practically no gravity."

"We'll break out more sleds—"

"I suggest not, Mac. We've already used up three couches out of six, and nearly all our acceleration foam. We still have a secondary boost to get through. Besides, I don't think you should leave the ship again, so near to impact time."

A minute or so passed while McKay thought hard.

"Here comes our own impact," called Devlin.

Muffled sounds came over the radio. McKay stayed quiet.

"We made it," Slazek said finally. "We were spilled off the sled, but there's no damage."

"You're right in the middle of the ice cover," said McKay, eyeing the displays. "Shall I try for a landing beside you, or can you make it back to the clear patch in the sun?"

"I don't think you should land back there, Mac. We didn't seal our shaft as tight as yours—we weren't anticipating rocket blast from the ship. Also, our shaft is vertical and shallow, so blast waves would go

right in. On the other hand, the ice cover where we've come down is pretty fragile. All pinnacles and slopes. They would cave in under the ship for sure."

McKay began to see what was coming. "What's your proposal, Walt?"

"We'll try to make it to where you are, Mac. If we don't, you have to save yourselves and Cathy."

"Agreed, Walt," said McKay, trying to forget Cathy's husband was out there. "We'll give you all the time we can. But we're going to lose your signal shortly. The asteroid's rotation, such as it is, will take the com relay over our horizon. I was hoping to take off before we lost contact with your warhead antenna."

"We won't be wasting any time, Mac. Dev's breaking out ice-climb gear now."

McKay looked at the panel clock. Forty-five minutes to Earth impact.

IV

IT was Devlin who had the experience in ice-climbing. Maybe not on distant planets or wandering asteroids but at least on Earth—the Alps, ranges in Canada and Alaska.

"I guess you give the orders for this part," said Slazek.

Devlin was unloading ropes and ice axes from the tilted sled. "lucky we brought this stuff. We'll have to fit each other with the crampons. Now look, Walt, it's going to be mainly common sense, but we'll have to

watch the gravity all the time on these ice slopes. It might seem we could bounce straight to the top using the suit jets, and maybe we could if we got a good purchase each time we touched, but how could we halt at the top? We don't know what's on the other side. If we couldn't stop, we might tumble right into some jagged blocks and rip the suits open. Or be carried onto a surface that couldn't bear our weight. So we'll have to go slowly and steadily. We can't leap around here any more than on, say the Everest icefall."

He strapped the crampons on Slazeck's feet, explaining the ties.

"And keep your feet apart while climbing, or you'll get sucked out through rips in your suit. Crampons are sharp as spurs." He should have accompanied that line with a reassuring grin through his polarized visor. But he had no stomach, at the moment, for grinning. He sat, legs splayed, watching Slazeck fumble with the unfamiliar straps. Then the two men uncoiled the climbing rope. In this gravity, it was like spaghetti with a mind of its own.

With Slazeck on the other end of the 300-foot rope, Devlin took the carabiners and pitons and attached them to his belt. "Ice-axe in the left hand, ice-dagger in the right," he said into his radio. "Use the pick," he indicated, "not the adze. I'll tie on to the carabiner on the dagger handle when the rope runs out, and reel you in."

"You mean you're going to do all the actual climbing—and just pull me along behind you?"

"That's it, Walt. Grade ten hard-rock tiger in the sky, that's me."

Slazeck dug in the pick and dagger, paying out the rope as Devlin, climbing or crawling with controlled haste, made his way up the gleaming slope. Each yard was won by striking out first with the ice axe, gaining purchase and ramming the dagger home before the axe curved forward again.

"You're going out of sight from here, Dev."

"Okay, I'm tying on now. Hold the axe by the pick and adze and push the handle away from you till you're leaning forward. Then I'll take in slack."

With a curious bunny-hopping motion, Slazeck followed him to the ridge.

"As an introduction to climbing this can't be beat," Devlin told him. "Little chance of falling, no rocks on the head, no avalanches, no sudden blinding mists..."

On the ice ridge, the sky seemed broader overhead. They saw that Earth had swollen noticeably since the start of the climb. "But does your ass get frizzled by the atmosphere on Everest?" Slazeck grunted. "Climb, Dev!"

The sequence was repeated again and again, between the jagged pinnacles, up and down the freakish low-g slopes. They were outpacing the asteroid's rotation, lowering the

Earth back toward the skyline. But all the time the home planet grew. Devlin increased the pace as he got into the rhythm of the climb. He had gone on out of sight, Slazeck still paying out the rope, when it went suddenly tight.

"It's taut here, Walt. You holding back?"

"It must be snagged," Slazeck said.

Devlin swore. "Okay, stay where you are. I'll reel myself back until I can free it."

The operation wasted another precious minute while Slazeck stood idle at the end of the rope. At last Devlin told him to come on up to the cleft. It seemed obvious to Slazeck, when he saw the broken ice in it, that a line passed across it would catch.

"Let's watch it, Dev," he said. "We're getting careless."

"It's the lack of exhilaration. This kind of mountaineering is a bore." Devlin started again, across a mound of rough ice ahead. "It's like a circular version of Mt. McKinley—a slow, monotonous, grinding climb."

By now they had to be near the ship, though the white nosecone steadfastly refused to break the horizon. They had been moving for more than twenty minutes and the Earth was huge. EVA in the Van Allen belts soon, just the ideal introduction to climbing Devlin had described.

"Ridge ahead, Walt. I'm tying on. Come up."

Slazeck joined him on the ridge and stared over. An ice slope of

seventy-five degrees, about sixty feet across, confronted them.

"We can't glissade in these suits, Walt. And a run's too risky. We have to rappell, thrusting ourselves down."

The explanation of the technique took up valuable seconds. Slazeck was now in the lead position. He leaned back until perpendicular to the ice and thrust himself down: long, slow, parabolic leaps. In this gravity, it took forever. At last Devlin braked him as he neared the bottom of the chasm.

He untied the rope and Devlin pulled it back to himself, doubled it, ran it over his shoulder and half around his waist. In due course, after another eternal descent, he too reached the bottom.

He glanced at his watch, and at the looming Earth. "I'd say our time's gone, Walt. If the ship's not over this next rise I don't believe we'll make it. Daggers and ice axes. Do what you've seen me doing and keep the rope short." He started briskly up the slope.

The ship was not there. Nor over the next ridge, since they could not see the nose section. They were paying out rope to start forward again for a desperate scramble over the ice sheet ahead, when the white fire of the RLV's chemical motors rose over the skyline and turned all the ice points to diamonds.

AFTER radio contact was lost, there was silence in the RLV

cabin. McKay felt acutely frustrated, resting unsuited in the cozy ship while his friends were struggling across that barren landscape. Since the vessel was standing on its tail, its occupants could see across the first ridge to the one beyond. They would glimpse the climbers coming, if the two made it. But the ball of the Earth was expanding so swiftly on the horizon that obviously the main issue now was speed.

"They'll get here in time, won't they?" Cathy asked querulously, over the communicator.

Wearily McKay rubbed his forehead. "I don't know. Climbing was never a hobby of mine nor, as far as I know, of Walt's."

"And Dev's been climbing a lot less since we got married," Cathy murmured unhappily.

Nearly a quarter-hour after loss-of-signal had cut off the climbers, Lang asked over the Earth relay about explosion time. "I'll delay it as long as possible," McKay replied loudly, for Cathy's sake. "Ten minutes before impact will be my deadline."

There was silence at the other end. Eventually Lang came back. "There's some feeling here that the consequences will be worse the longer you wait."

"That's debatable. The sooner we blast, the wider will the fragments spread. Destruction will follow over a broader area."

"The people in Venezuela may prefer it that way, Mac."

"The people round about are as important as Venezuelans," McKay responded.

That silenced Earth for quite a while. The asteroid and its human cargo rushed on toward the home planet at frightful speed, far faster than McKay had ever made the approach by spaceship.

The shortage of g-couches was no longer going to be a problem. McKay launched another of Earth's Interface relays outward, to separate his ship from the asteroid an instant before explosion deadline. If Walt and Dev came into sight with only minutes to spare, he could now send the last couch/sled unit to them by remote control. Another power failure at that stage at least could not make the situation any worse.

Suspense and frustration mounted as the minutes passed. McKay considered launching the sled to bring them over the final part of the climb. No. Too risky. He could not pinpoint the location of the climbers, and to set the sled down anywhere else would mean they could never get to it.

Once again, Lang called from Earth. "They're still not in sight," McKay told him.

A short pause. "I'm deeply sorry to have to do this, Mac. You are ordered by the Committee for Earth's Defense to take off immediately and trigger the bombs."

McKay glanced at the cabin display. Alone down there, Cathy was plugged into the conversation. "Five

minutes more, Lang," he answered.

There was no reply. The Committee knew it could not control him. Threaten to cashier him after his return? Nonsense. With the ship inescapably keyed to his own personality by the Sasarenn relay in his head, no one else could be Planetary Agent on equal terms.

On the ship, the nightmare was becoming reality. McKay knew exactly what would happen next; it was just a question of when Cathy's grip on herself would fail.

There it was. Her voice. She was asking, "Only two more minutes—are you really going to take off, Mac?"

"I must, Cathy." But he could not face that himself. "I can see no reason to prolong the agony. Even if they come over that ridge now, there'd be no way they could get to the lock in time. I'll have her up in thirty seconds." He threw switches, made preparations. The ship came to life. "Rocket acceleration warning, three seconds," called McKay, closing the firing circuits.

"You can't do it, Mac!"

"I have no choice," said McKay, pulling back the throttle slide. Explosive bolts cut the cables and the RLV went straight up on the bright flare of the chemical motors. It was not a full-power lift-off, though in that low gravity it looked like one. McKay cut the thrust after five seconds, acquired the com relay and activated the timers. Ninety seconds to detonation—and on the radio...

"Slazeck to McKay—good luck.

Thank you for waiting so long."

The search devices suddenly pinpointed them. They had made about three-quarters of the distance. Decision seized McKay: he had done all he could for Earth, now he must save his crew.

"Invert and cancel!" he snapped to the autopilot.

The ship turned over much faster than he could have managed it on fly-by-wire. Eighty seconds to detonation, and it was heading back for the asteroid.

"McKay to Slazeck. Report landing conditions in your area."

"Don't try it, Mac. We're on a fragile sheet between ridges. It couldn't take the weight of the ship, much less a rocket blast-off. It would cave in, bury the ship and all of us."

"I'm coming in anyway, Walt."

"Okay, Mac—we'll jump, you catch us."

Inspiration struck. "We don't need that!" McKay shouted.

He pitched the nose down and fired the motors, adding a horizontal component to downward velocity.

"I'm trying hyperbolic flyby, which will be slow in this gravity. Stand by to catch airlock lines!"

THERE was no storm-front this time to blow the lines aside, as once had happened during a previous rescue mission. The ship sailed down with computer-aimed precision. The climbers grabbed the lines and rose off.

Already the hyperbolic path was

taking the ship away from the asteroid, but much too slowly. Arnold had set the orbital relay to bring the RLV to rest.

"Up Interface!" McKay cried, and fired the motors to thrust the ship through.

On Earth, the suspense reached a critical value. "What's happening?" Lang yelled maniacally.

"We're clear of the asteroid, with the entire crew aboard," McKay answered triumphantly. "Ten seconds to detonation." He forced himself into some semblance of calm. Were they still on television? "Nine—eight—seven—six—five—four—three—two—one—fire!"

The ship was now thousands of miles from the plunging asteroid. Still, McKay had expected some visual effect on the screens. Or had the timers failed?

"The charges have fired, I assume," he told Earth, "though there's no visible sign yet. The asteroid is going away from us very fast, but I'm going to higher magnifications on the RLV sensors. Ah, there it starts—the ice cover is exploding off, along with a lot of small debris. The fireballs are breaking out! If we've done nothing else we've blown two big chunks out of the asteroid, but if we got the resonance we wanted . . . Look at that! Two golden fireballs, coalescing into a rainbow sphere, too much ionization for our radar to penetrate—" He paused till he plainly identified what he was looking for. "We've done it!

There are chunks bursting out on both sides, along the axis between the detonations. We've split the asteroid right through the center! Not just in two halves, but into a great cluster of fragments."

"Fantastic!" Lang replied hoarsely from Earth. "Everyone's going crazy here. I guess you can hear the noise. You've saved the world, McKay, do you realize that? Millions are already celebrating. Everyone is especially delighted that you managed to get Walt and Dev back aboard."

"Thanks," said McKay. People celebrating. Delighted. Well, nothing with the weight or momentum required to crack Earth's crust would hit the planet now. It was safe. And destruction could not occur on the scale that would have characterized a hit by the single solid bulk of the asteroid. But the countless fragments, large and small, into which it had been split—they could do plenty of damage yet.

He looked up. Arnold, the youngster, had appeared at his side.

"Congratulations, sir!"

"There will be casualties by the thousand. Especially if the stuff smashes into land masses."

"But nothing like what would have happened if you hadn't succeeded." Arnold was elated. "Be sides, most of the smaller stuff will burn up in the atmosphere. And even the larger rocks will be peeled radially."

"That's true." He unfastened his seat straps and leaned into the cabin.

"What's going on back there?"

The inner door of the lock was open and Cathy was beside it already. In the lock, Slazeck and Devlin were shedding their suits. "We're doing all right," Devlin called. "I hear we got the bastard."

"We split it into dust, metallic gravel and a bunch of chunks," McKay confirmed.

He retreated to the couch, stared at the screens.

"The wreckage is still separating," he reported to Earth. "It's getting to be a long way ahead of us now, so I'll move the ship down through Inter-face. You're going to need overhead spotting when those big lumps get into the atmosphere, which will be in five minutes or so from now."

"Roger."

Acquiring the orbital relays again, McKay took the ship down to fifteen thousand miles, and again two minutes later to ten thousand. He had no intention of getting in front of that falling cluster of shot, or even meeting small fragments expelled at high speed by the explosions. As he went down to seven thousand miles, the other four were plugging in down in the cabin. "There's going to be a fantastic meteor shower in less than two minutes," said Devlin, "and I really want to see that!"

"You might have been in the middle of it," McKay remarked. He was watching some of the bigger fragments falling ahead of them. They had split the asteroid very successfully, but even a thousand

tons falling at that speed would do more damage than a flock of H-bombs.

His misgivings grew to near-certainty as he estimated the number of fragments.

"Lang," he said, "I think this is going to be pretty bad, though not the global disaster it might have been. You'd better get out your worldwide alert now, in case the big flare-up interferes with reception later. The leading edge of the meteor swarm is going to enter the atmosphere very shortly—in fact, I can see the first trails already..."

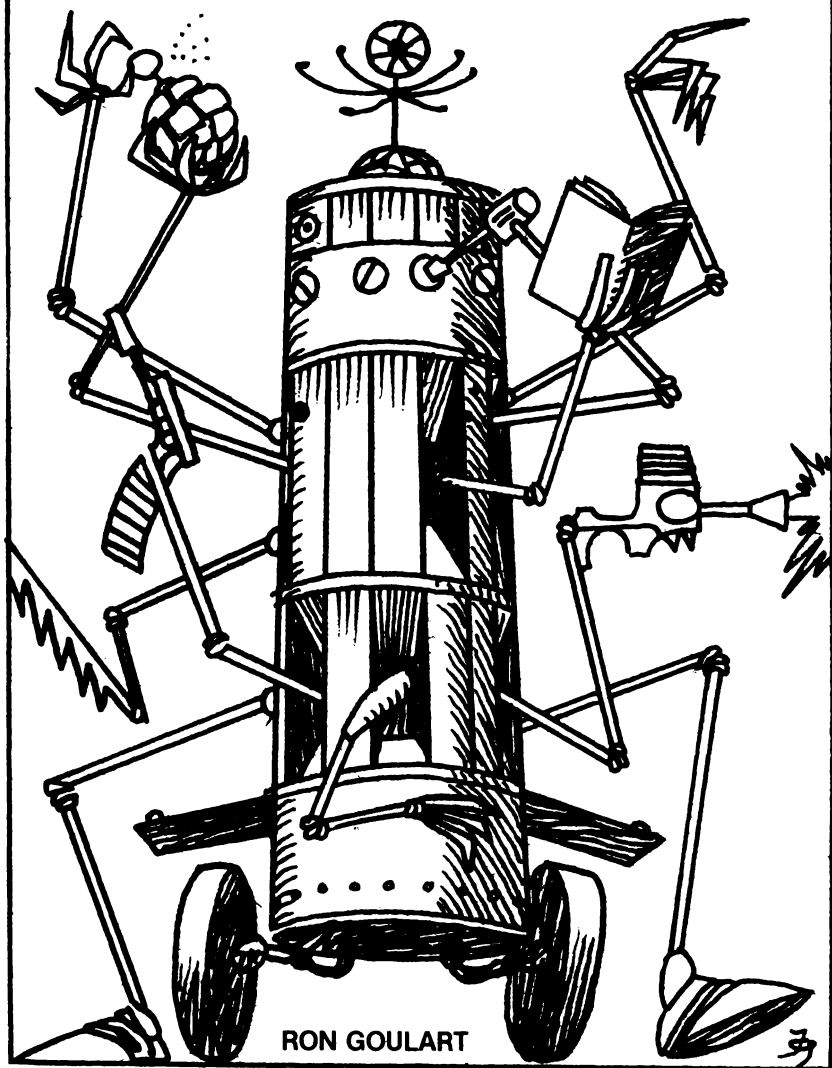
He had to abandon the description. There were no adequate words for the spectacle of billions of nickel-iron particles igniting in the upper atmosphere, burning themselves to vapor.

Beneath the fiery cover, glowing, the larger fragments were plowing into the blue haze of planetary atmosphere.

"There's the first impact, offshore," said McKay to Earth. "A brilliant white flash...I can just see the mushroom growing. There's another—and another. There are going to be tidal waves all around the Caribbean. Three more impacts, four, six—one of those was on land. There's a second land hit—" He went on, completely the professional observer now, as dead silence took over in the RLV cabin. "Three more hits together inland...another two out at sea. Oh, God...a direct hit—God, on Caracas..."

The little war-robot had everything—except a funnybone!

DINGBAT



RON GOULART

HE was sitting in the shade, clear of the brawl, on the carved wooden porch of a roadside inn. A secret agent appeared out of the bright sun and offered to shake hands. John Wesley Sand looked at the plump man and his outstretched hand. A faint white scar circled the wrist. "Hello, Mort," he said.

"I'm calling myself Ralph now," said the Political Espionage Office man "Am I blocking your view?"

"I wasn't watching," said Sand. He was a lanky light-haired type in his late twenties. His left eye always seemed about to wink.

The PEO agent said, "When I got the tip you were here on Silvestra, in the Cinco Territory, I guessed you'd rocketed out for the annual brawling festival." The plump man's voice changed to a deeper, burred one and he added, "But me, I knew you hadn't, John."

"I'll tell you, Mort," said Sand, moving his glass of green ale slowly across the wooden surface of the table in front of him. "Right now Cinco Territory is somewhat hectic. When the brawling is over, though, it will be calm and quiet. Which is why I'm here. For calm and quiet."

"Please," said the PEO agent in his higher voice, "don't pretend you're not for hire any more." His voice switched lower. "We need you, John. We've lost two of our Political Espionage Office agents on this thing already."

"Now you want to lose a freelancer."

The plump agent came around the table and sat down in the chair nearest the long bony Sand. "If I can get a word in here—me, Ralph—"

Sand said, "I thought you guys voted on who was going to dominate."

"Oh, we did, but Mort won't play fair."

"I get tired going around talking like a pansy," said the agent, his voice deep again. "It's bad enough being chubby." His voice went up. "You're the one who was twenty pounds overweight, Mort. I'm sorry I ever got stuck in that cruiser with you."

"You ought to be calm," suggested Sand. "Here you are, a miracle of science, probably the only one on this planet at the moment. Enjoy yourself, Ralph."

"Ralph is some pansy name," said the agent in his Mort voice. "Boy, it seemed like a good idea at the time. After those damned guerillas planted the bomb in the cruiser, and Fatso and I got blown up. Not enough left of either of us to save, but plenty of parts to make one composite. However, being a comp is not much fun."

"Being alive at all ought to strike you as fun." Sand scratched the hair over his left ear. "You want to hire me for something?"

"Let me explain," said the Ralph voice of the comp agent.

"I'd appreciate it." Down in the bright dusty streets, intricate fist-fights were going on. The population of Cinco Territory was about evenly

divided between humans and cat men. The dozens of brawls within view involved about the same percentages of each. Sand sipped his ale, watching the yellow street dust drift up into the bright blue of midday. "First, what's PEO paying?"

Ralph said, "John, you've been on Barnum, our home planet, in recent months. So you know that there's a little bit of an inflationary trend going on. To help curb this PEO has agreed to pay all mercenaries a little less for the time being."

Sand smiled quietly at the plump PEO man. "I figure if you can't hire me, you'll have to go after those highjacked weapons yourself. And you might end up like Brennan and DeBonnis."

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“YOU already know why I'm out here on Silvestra?"

"Even just sitting around," said Sand, "you hear things. About six weeks ago the Barnum government, which controls the provisional government of this planet and its territories, decided to get rid of some three hundred war weapons that had been stored some place out in the Quatro Territory for a dozen years or more. Since Silvestra is a partially restricted planet, the transportation system isn't what it is on Barnum and the obsolete weapons were shipped by train. Halfway between the old armory in Quatro and the spaceport here in Cinco the train was stopped and the weapons taken."

"John, do you know who highjacked them?"

"No," answered Sand. "But you pay me ten thousand interplanet dollars and I'll find out."

"Ten thousand?" said the agent in both voices at once. "John, didn't I just explain about inflation?"

"That's why I need ten thousand."

"Ten thousand?"

"Plus a thousand now for expenses."

"What's going to cost a thousand dollars out in the wilderness?"

"Bribes," answered Sand. "Sometimes it's simpler to pay people not to kill you—rather than fighting it out."

"Well, John, since you've done such good work for us in the past,"

said the PEO agent slowly, "we'll meet your terms."

"Okay."

"Do you know about a man named Dougal Amarel?"

"Not too much," said Sand. "He's some kind of political maverick, hiding out from the provisional government."

"Yes." The agent's plump hands fluttered above the table for a moment. "Amarel, a human type, has founded something he calls the War Rally Party. This particular planet hasn't had a real war for seventeen years or more. Probably these brawling festivals have acted as a safety valve. Amarel seems to think his people are soft and need a good rousing war to toughen them up. We suspect he may be the one who stole the weapons, intending to supply his followers with them."

"I haven't heard anything about that," said Sand. "Though it's possible. Exactly what kind of weapons were on that train?"

"Nearly three hundred dingbats." "Dingbats?"

"A weapon from before your time, John. Invented by a renowned scientist named Marcus Lorenzo Holts some three decades ago. It works wonderfully well in the jungle. Barnum kept getting involved in jungle wars on one planet after another around that time and these dingbats came in handy."

"What do dingbats look like?"

"They're robots of sorts. About four feet high. They're not humanoid

but shaped rather like hot-water heaters, if you know what one of those is. They're on wheels and are extremely good at tracking. They have all kinds of little extendable arms that can shoot and chop and hurl projectiles. You'll see at the briefing."

"Why did Holts call them dingbats?"

"He was simply being whimsical," said the agent. "Intellectuals often have an unfortunate weakness for whimsy. If you'll come on over to the Silvestra Sylvan where I'm staying, I'll give you more background information and show you a movie."

Sand's left eye nearly closed. "Okay," he said, "but later on."

"Well, no later than sundown."

Sand nodded. He finished his ale and glanced at the nearest brawl.

SAND wandered into the shadowed room and slouched down into a rustic chair. "Brief me," he said.

"You're forty minutes late," said the chubby agent, tapping a film cartridge with a plump finger.

"Yes," agreed Sand.

"We think it will be valuable for you to look at this special intelligence film about the dingbats. That way you'll be much better prepared to search for them." The PEO man moved flat-footed across the dry matting of the inn room floor and shoved the cartridge into a slot in the television wall. "Some of this is still secret and classified footage, John."

"Shall I close my eyes?"

The agent chuckled in his Mort voice. "Enough spoofing. Let's get down to the serious business at hand." He pushed the starter toggle and the wall was filled with an enormous picture of hills and woods and distant cottages in the early morning sun. "This is combat footage from the memorable battle of Leisure Hills Estates. You've heard of it?"

"No."

"Well, it was a famous battle during the Eight Years' War on Murdstone some twenty years or so back. Here come the dingbats."

On the wall tank-shaped robots, nearly man-high, came rolling down a grassy hillside. There were hundreds of them, some bronze-colored and some the hue of gray enamel, moving ahead smoothly on thin black wheels.

Sand stretched up out of his chair. "That's enough I'll recognize them now."

"Wait a bit, John," said the secret agent. "Watch them in action. It will help you realize how dangerous they can be in the wrong hands. There they go into the town proper. As I recall, Leisure Hill Estates was a suspected sanctuary for over-age guerillas. During the Eight Years' War there were a lot of left-wing senior citizen guerillas operating. It was a war that produced some odd factions."

On the wall cylindrical dingbats were rolling down the main street of

the little town. On the cottage roofs old men in battle clothes showed now, sniping with blaster rifles. Arms began to sprout from the dingbats—arms ending in pistols, arms that spouted flame, arms that terminated in canisters of subduing gas.

"They were very versatile for their time," explained the PEO man. "This entire skirmish involved not one live combat soldier, not on our side. In fact even these combat movies were taken by a dingbat cameraman. There's a particularly nice shot of an old lady and her rocking chair going up in smoke. Harsh, realistic—the face of war."

The burning suburb snapped off the wall screen and was replaced by a blond man in an old-fashioned synthetic leather jumpsuit, sitting in a tin chair.

"This bit of film is from a popular Barnum program of twenty seasons back. I believe it was called the Ed Nerf Hour of Talk." The Ralph voice took over and corrected, "Ed Neff."

One lone tank-shaped dingbat sat at a piano near the grinning host, playing a four-hand piano duet by himself.

"Here you see part of a public relations effort to humanize the dingbats," said the PEO agent. "I have several hundred feet showing a white-bearded dingbat handing out gift packages in a slum."

"This is sufficient," said Sand, standing once more.

Ed Neff and the piano-playing dingbat were suddenly supplanted by

a vast flat field. In the center of the field stood a domed building. As the camera moved closer the name Simulated National Bank showed over the grilled building entrance.

"These final films, from the Fort Anmar Proving Grounds, were taken some seventeen years ago. It was hoped the dingbats might fit into civilian life. Here they were supposed to put down a simulated riot at a typical branch bank. Look there, those six lead dingbats are getting much too excited. Here they're shooting the eight or ten volunteer soldiers who pretended to be causing a run on the bank. The dingbats proved to have a devil of a time switching from live ammunition to blanks."

The wall turned white again.

The PEO agent said, "Don't you feel better prepared and better informed after this?"

Sand made no reply.

A PACK of bristling blue dogs came stalking across the high grass of the plain. They snarled, yapped, bayed, circled. Sand scratched the side of his nose with the flat of the knife he had been using to slice his loaf of dark bread. He pointed the tip of the bright knife at the seven wild dogs, who had halted about thirty feet from him. "Easy now," he told the pack.

Sand remained on the stump he was using as a chair. Far across the empty grassy fields were the tracks of the Silvestra Overland Railroad.

By asking questions and paying out \$320 in bribes in the past two days, Sand had learned that the dingbat train had been highjacked somewhere between where he was now and the small station town of Esforma six miles up the line.

One of the wild dogs lurched closer, his shaggy blue head bent to the right and his teeth intermittently showing. He was making an annoyed, puzzled sound.

"Alongside my knapsack over there," Sand said, "I have a sturdy walking stick. Inside that same pack I have a blaster pistol. So if you fellows don't want your heads cracked or your tails shot off, go away."

The lead dog howled. Then he sat down suddenly and began scratching his ear.

"Ticks," said Sand. "Come over here and I'll get it off you."

"I'm just in time." From behind Sand a blaster sizzled and the scratching dog gave one surprised yelp as it turned to flames and then to char.

Sand rose up quietly and looked back. Standing twenty feet behind him was a short and slightly bent cat man in woods-colored tunic and trousers. He was smiling, whiskers perked up, and putting away his silver pistol. "You a sportsman?" asked Sand. "Or do you have some other reason for going around killing stray dogs?" Sand was slightly unsettled, since he had not heard the cat man approach at all.

"I'm the chap who just saved you from being devoured, sir," said the cat man in his high voice. "My name is Olan and by profession I'm a guide and woodsman." He gestured at the dogs, now running away. "Never trust a wild dog." He moved closer silently, rubbing his paws together. "You no doubt have other methods on your home planet, sir—kind words, little favors, amiable persuasions. This is wild country here, sir. I'll tell you my rule. If a bunch of dogs are coming for you, kill one of them as soon as you safely can. This rule can be applied to more than wild dogs."

Sand sat down and resumed cutting the loaf of bread. "What are you working on at the moment, Olan?"

The cat man rubbed his cheek whiskers with a paw and then rubbed his ear. "I wish you hadn't mentioned ticks. Whenever somebody mentions ticks I imagine I've picked up one." He rubbed his ear again and squatted down three yards from Sand. His long brown-and-white tail swished at the grass tips as he spoke. "You're this chap Sand, sir?"

Sand nodded, left eye almost closed. "What did you come after me to sell?"

The cat man chuckled and touched his whiskers. "You're very trusting, sir. Perhaps I came rather to kill you and take your money. Here is another rule. With such poor people as you find in many parts of our planet you must not offer big

bribes. Start with a small bribe. Better yet, give the chap an injury first and he may tell what he knows for nothing."

"We have different views of our professions," said Sand. "Okay, if you want to try and rob me get to it. If you don't, make your pitch and go away."

"You're the chap who's looking for the dingbats, are you not?"

"I am."

"I can guide you to the men who waylaid the Silvestra Overland Railroad train."

"Who are they?"

Olan laughed a high fuzzy laugh. "Perhaps you're not as amiable, really, as you act. Perhaps you're the sort of chap who might learn what I know and then kill me."

Biting into the dark bread, Sand said, "So you'd like a fee to guide me? And you won't tell me anything now?"

The brown-and-white cat man spread his paws wide. "You're a mercenary, sir, and I'm a mercenary. We understand each other. Pay me first, and I'll lead you to the men and the weapons you want. But I'll tell you nothing more in advance."

"Well, okay," replied Sand, chewing. He pointed the knife at Olan. "If I ever decide to merge I'll get hold of you. Right now I'll continue on my own." He stood and picked up his pack, keeping one hand near the flap concealing the pistol.

Olan spread his paws again and rose. He smiled and his sleepy cat

eyes narrowed. "In a day or two, sir, I'll look you up once more. You act like a chap who gets impatient. Two more days of no success for you and we can perhaps do business." He bowed slightly and turned away.

When the cat man had been gone ten minutes, Sand walked off toward the Esforma station.

THE heavy woman stroked her inner thigh with one fat jeweled hand. She leaned until her chin hung over the small oaken table. Her tiny mouth pursed for an instant. "Certainly, certainly," she said to Sand. She slumped back in her chair and stopped stroking.

Sand's chair was pulled far back from the table and his legs were stretched out in front of him. "What is it you're so positive about?"

"Moms Granada is my name," she said, rubbing in the vicinity of her large breasts until the nylon of her frock crackled. "Certainly you're Sand."

He agreed he was. He had been to the Esforma station and the six-building town surrounding it. He had found out nothing, spent another hundred dollars. Now he was stopped at a small inn in the low hills above town. The round windows of the inn were growing black with night. "I'm better known out here than I expected."

Moms Granada nodded her bright red head at the frail cat man behind the oak bar across the room. "He's a chum of Olan's. Olan was in here

earlier. He told the innkeeper all about you and what you're looking for. That's the very reason I invited you over."

Sand reached between his legs and pulled his chair closer to the large woman's table. There was no one but them and the innkeeper in the beamed whitewashed room. "You know, ma'am, I had you figured for someone in a line other than informing."

"Right. I'm a procuress by trade," admitted Moms Granada. "That fact explains why I know what you want to know. My customers are a splendid source of information." She ran a heavy forefinger down the side of her pulpy face.

"You know who took that stuff off the train?"

"Jean-Paul Howzinger." Her little mouth pursed again.

"Yeah," said Sand. "I've heard of him. He heads up an outfit called the Primo-Cinco Gang. Bunch of desperadoes, highwaymen and cutthroats. Nobody has linked him with this job."

"People are afraid to talk about him much. You're from off-planet and already you know he cuts throats. I can't be hurt by him, though. Five hundred dollars—"

"Buys me what?"

"I can tell you where Jean-Paul Howzinger is hiding at this moment."

"Him I don't care about. Where did he take the stuff?"

"He's still got it," she said. "Two days ago he did, at least. I delivered a

wagonload of girls there. I can draw you a map.”

Sand lifted his left heel from the wood floor and then dropped it. His left eye closed. Tapping his heel once more he watched the fat woman. “Okay, I’ll buy your map.”

“Tell you what, Sand—I’ll throw in a girl.”

“Nope,” he said. “I’m here for dinner and a night’s rest.”

“The food here isn’t all that good,” said the fat woman. “You’ve been around the planets and I bet you never saw a cat man who could cook. This girl is brand new. I’ve been scouting the area and I just hired her. I’ve got her locked upstairs now.”

Sand closed his left eye again. “Locked?”

“She’s had some second thoughts,” said Moms Granada. “In my line of work you can develop qualms. That’s why I’d like her to meet you first, rather than some back-country desperado or cut-throat.”

Sand said, “Okay, since it’s a special case. You get to work making the map and I’ll go up right now.”

“I appreciate this.” She touched his arm as he passed. “I’ll climb partway upstairs with you. It’s dark on the staircase and you can slip me the five hundred and get the key.”

Sand grinned and started upward.

THE girl was twenty-two years old, slim and blond, wearing a simple blue shift. She was tied to the

near post of the four-poster bed. The ropes around her wrists were long enough to allow her to sit up straight on the old trunk at the foot of the bed.

Sand locked the door behind him. The room was small, whitewashed. “I’m John Wesley Sand.”

“Which are you—” asked the girl—“highwayman, desperado or cut-throat?”

“None of those,” he told her. “I got curious about why you were locked in here.”

“What did you pay Moms?”

“Five hundred bucks.”

The girl inhaled sharply. “Oh, she’s overcharging you.”

“I get a map, too.” He came nearer, took out his knife and cut her free.

“Now wait,” said the blond girl. “Did she promise to sell you information on the location of the Holts dingbats?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what she’s got in mind for you,” said the girl. “She offered to help me locate them while I was making inquiries in Esforma yesterday.”

“Instead she locked you up.”

“Yes.” The girl had a fine sharp-boned face. She watched Sand for a moment. “You’re not with the Political Espionage Office?”

“Only part-time. I’m a mercenary.”

“Fine, because I don’t want to be obliged to PEO or any other agency of the Barnum government.”

"And who are you?"

"Ann Veronica Holts," she said.

"My grandfather invented the dingbats."

"You want them back for sentimental reasons?"

"No, I want to destroy them."

"Why?"

"I've been out here on Silvestra with a private foundation called the Remote Welfare Service for almost two years," said the girl. "When I found out those dreadful machines were still in existence I decided they had to be destroyed. My grandfather was a misguided man. He even kept dingbats in his home. I was raised by him and I grew up around the things."

Sand put a hand on hers and shook his head. He was getting better at hearing a cat man's approach. "You think this Jean-Paul Howzinger really has the dingbats?" he asked close to her ear.

"Yes. He and his gang stole them to resell later. But Moms Granada isn't really going to let you get the dingbats. She's on his side."

"She is, though, planning to take you to his stronghold and add you to the girls she's sold him?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Sand touched her hand again, then moved quietly across the moonlit room and unfastened the latch on the single window. He swung the shutters open and hopped to the ledge. Below, a gentle hill and high grass merged silently into pine forest.

"I thought you were going to rescue me," said Ann Veronica.

"Eventually I am," answered Sand.

The door to the room was shoved open. The innkeeper, Olan and two other cat men rushed in, each armed with a knife.

Sand jumped out into the night.

HE bellied forward through the spiky grass, going in the same direction as the wind across the afternoon plateau and timing his flickering of the stiff grass to match that of the wind. At the edge of a cliff he rolled to his left, slowly and carefully, then raised himself slightly and looked down from behind a protecting shrub. Below Moms Granada drove a sturdy, bright-painted closed wagon drawn by four brown grouts—a grout is something like a horse and something like a cow, with more legs than either—along a dusty trail. Olan, the cat man guide, was riding on the seat next to Moms. Inside, shackled, was Ann Veronica. Sand had been following the three of them since the hour after dawn when they had left the inn.

Somebody stepped on his back.

"Oof," said Sand as a boot heel dug into his spine.

"Stretch your hands out in front of you," ordered a nasal voice. "Where's your knife?"

Sand twisted his head and saw the cat man standing with one foot on him—a heavy fellow in a rough homespun jerkin. He held two long-

stemmed pistols. "It's poking into my lower ribs at the moment."

"Turn over and fetch it," said the big cat man.

At Sand's nearby pack a human type had just located Sand's pistol. The man was short and old, with a white circle of whiskers around his mouth. "Gun," he said. "Loaf of bread, cracker crumbs, pinch of lint."

"Just find his weapons," said the cat man.

"I like to be thorough, you slim-witted tabby."

"The knife, Sand," repeated the cat man.

Sand, on his back now, drew out the knife.

"Why are you out here?"

"Hiking," said Sand as the cat man dropped a booted foot on his chest.

"You're John Wesley Sand and you've been following Olan and that rolling bordello."

"Well, yes, that too."

"Hoping to locate Jean-Paul Howzinger perhaps?" A third person had come silently across the grass. He was tall and slightly bent and had a high forehead and slicked-down dark hair. He was graced with a left-sided smile and slightly yellow skin.

"From the descriptions I've had," said Sand, "you're not Howzinger."

"How true. I'm Dougal Amarel, the noted revolutionary."

"Why don't you get your foot off the lad, you glassy-eyed wood pussy?" said the bearded old man.

"Let Sand up," said Amarel.

The cat man complied.

Sand sat erect, wiping his chest with his palms. "You're after the dingbats?" he asked Amarel.

Amarel gave a faint chuckle, wringing his long yellowish hands. "Well, it's an interesting story. I intended to hijack the train myself. I had worked out a plan with DeVoto. This is DeVoto here," he explained, pointing at the cat man.

"They all got silly names," remarked the old man. "Foolish cat names."

"Well, so DeVoto and I conceived a plan for hijacking the weapons train. We got ourselves down by the railroad tracks, all beautifully concealed—DeVoto and I and fifty of my War Rally Party. There we were waiting for the train," said Amarel. "We must have waited the whole morning. And darned if Jean-Paul and his Primo-Cinco gang hadn't already held up the train sixteen miles before it got to us."

"When you got a pussy cat planning your strategy," said the old man, "you can't expect many coups."

"Smith here," explained Amarel, "is a veteran of several wars on several planets." He strode over and slapped old Smith across his whiskered mouth. "No more anti-feline talk, Smith."

Sand laughed.

Amarel said, "I didn't think you were someone who laughed at another's discomfort."

"I was amused by the fact that I'm not the only one who doesn't hear

people sneaking up." He nodded toward their right.

Out of the grass rose six big men. The nearest was plump and moustached and wore a flowered tunic and neck scarf. He held a silver blaster rifle aimed at Amarel. "You ought not to come so close to my lair."

"Now this," said Amarel to Sand, "is Jean-Paul Howzinger."

"So I figured," replied Sand.

SAND went stumbling sideways across the mud floor of the stone hut. The thick plank door was slammed and locked at his back. He retrieved his balance just short of the chair Ann Veronica Holts was sitting in.

"Do you happen to have a screwdriver?" she asked.

Sand flexed his right arm, the one Howzinger's men had twisted behind him in the process of thrusting him into the hut. "Nope," he told her. He crossed the dry gray floor and listened at the thick door. Then he returned to the girl. "Would a knife do?"

"Probably," said the pretty girl. "Oh, by the way, I'm not angry with you or anything. I realized your strategy. I had a lot of time to think while I was trussed up in that stuffy wagon. Yes, I realized you were using me as a sort of stalking horse. To lead you to Jean-Paul Howzinger and his gang."

"Is that what a stalking horse does? I keep getting it mixed up with

a scapegoat and a stray lamb. Why did you want a screwdriver?"

"Over there," answered the girl.

In the far corner of the low stone hut were two cylindrical mechanisms, obviously somewhat broken down. Screws and cogs and curls of fine wire were scattered about. "What are they? Two broken-down dingbats?"

"Yes. Apparently Howzinger and his men had some trouble getting the hang of how the mechanisms work. They wrecked the first couple they tried to operate."

"I always," said Sand as he reached down alongside his ankle, "carry a spare knife in my boot."

"Good. It's fortunate you were thrown in here."

Sand handed her the short blade. "They seem to have sorted out the prisoners by affiliation. They put Amarel and his followers two huts over."

"He was captured along with you?" She left the chair.

"Actually Amarel captured me. Then Howzinger and the Primo-Cinco bunch came along and captured us all."

"While I was bouncing along, securely bound, in that dirty wagon—well, I came to the conclusion you were honest," Ann Veronica told him. She dropped to one knee beside the discarded war machines. She touched the tip of the knife to her pretty chin. "That's one of the things that differentiates men from machinery. Instincts. Hunches. Feelings.

I often argued about that with my grandfather during the hot summer afternoons I spent hanging around his workshop when I was a kid."

Sand eyed the chair she had been sitting in. He moved it closer to her and dropped down on it. "You think you can repair these two dingbats?"

"Certainly. They had the adjusting knob turned up too high and that overheated these link rods right in here and naturally that put undue pressure on the mandrels as well as the billets. When that happens the extra strain affects the axial compressor and so all these thrust springs under here get loose and jiggle free."

"And you can fix it all up with just a knife?"

"Well, a screwdriver would be better—but I think so."

"Are these things still loaded?"

"Yes, because you can't disarm them if there's a malfunction. A feature my grandfather built in for battlefield protection."

"Then we can, theoretically, use the pair of dingbats here to help us fight our way out of Howzinger's stronghold," said Sand. After the Primo-Cinco gang had captured him and the War Rally Party people, Sand had been brought, tied and bent over the back of a pack grout, through the valley and up onto a rocky slope, thick with scrub and black cactus. Howzinger had nearly a hundred men with him on the tree-surrounded slope. They occupied something like three dozen huts. Behind the largest were two hundred or more packing

crates with *dingbat* stenciled on each. While Ann Veronica tinkered, Sand wandered to the thick wood door and put his left eye to a slim crack. "That's interesting," he said.

"What is?"

"A hundred or so angry-looking guys are riding out of the woods, humans and cat men. Shooting a lot."

"They must certainly be Amarel's War Party people trying to rescue him."

Sand sidestepped and put his eye to a different crack. "Howzinger and his gang are starting to uncrate the dingbats."

"To help repel the attack, I assume." Ann Veronica stood up, absently wiping one oil-spotted hand across her buttocks. "There."

Whooping was commencing outside. "Got them fixed already?"

"Yes, I believe so." She paused, listening. "Oh, they've got their dingbats turned up too high again." She reached down and fingered a series of buttons under a plate in one of the dingbat's backs. Then locked the plate in place.

THE war machine skittered a few feet. A thin alloy arm popped out of its right side and made a saluting gesture against the top of the tank. "Subaltern 068 reporting for duty," said the machine out of a round grid in its midsection.

"Go out through that door, 068," ordered Ann Veronica. She got the other dingbat activated.

This one jumped erect, saluted and said, "God bless you, miss."

"Darn," said the girl. "This one's programed to be a chaplain. My grandfather always built a few of them to soothe his critics." She came over to Sand. "We'll have to make do with 068 here."

Subaltern 068, using three of his arms and a tube that extended out of his chest, had burned the hinges and locks off the big door and now used two metal-booted feet to kick the door down.

"Moms Granada parked her wagon twenty yards from here," said Ann Veronica. "Was it still there when they brought you in?"

"You get an odd perspective, upside down over a pack grout. But I think I did notice the wagon."

"Okay, 068. Cover us while we run for that wagon."

"You bet, miss." Subaltern 068 rolled out of the hut, two arms swinging blaster pistols. A flame cannon extended from his top.

Keeping behind the dingbat, Sand and the lovely girl headed for the wagon. Although it was empty of occupants, the grouts had not yet been unharnessed. Sand boosted Ann Veronica to the seat and jumped up beside her to take the reins. "Get inside," he told her.

"I have to stay out here and instruct 068."

A thousand feet from them the Primo-Cinco gang by now had nearly half the dingbats uncrated. Howzinger was supervising while part of

his gang fired at the advancing War Rally bunch from the protection of the hut walls. The dingbats were still mostly making whooping sounds. Some of them were running in wobbly circles among the men who were uncrating. A dozen of the war machines were firing straight up in the air with a variety of weapons, others were puffing out clouds of a green-hued gas. Fifteen were digging a trench behind the packing cases.

"Get going," said Sand to the grouts, switching the reins. The animals started moving and the wagon rolled.

Ann Veronica told her smoothly functioning dingbat, "068, make a path for us. Use your anesthetic pellets." To Sand the girl added, "These pellets are the one humane touch grandfather agreed to build in."

"Right you are, miss," replied the dingbat. Two new arms extended from low on the tank and the machine went spinning down the slopes, firing at the invaders who were leaving the brush and cactus and coming up the hillside.

An albino cat man was hit first and stumbled off his horse, falling asleep in midair a second before he crashed in a blueberry bush. Two white-bearded men fell next and then the War Rally Party members started to pull back to avoid the oncoming wagon. In five minutes Sand and Ann Veronica had ridden clear of the fighting and were out in the valley beyond the slopes.

Subaltern 068 whirred up along-

side and said, "Requesting permission to assume command of battle operations back there, miss. Now that you're free of danger."

Sand's left eye closed for an instant. "You're designed to lead the rest of those dingbats?" he shouted down.

"In the absence of authorized human military personnel, yes. That's what the 068 designation indicates," replied the rolling dingbat. "You see, there's no rank higher than subaltern among us. The numerical designations are how..."

"Since there are no official human military people in charge, you are?"

"Exactly, sir," replied Subaltern 068. "My fellow dingbats back there will simply keep running around aimlessly unless some authorized person takes over, or some civilian such as you, miss, who has sufficient knowledge. This latter circumstance seems unlikely. What the dingbats need is a clear-cut order to attack a specific enemy."

"Okay," said Sand, "go back and take over, 068."

"And who is the enemy to be?"

"Round up all the humans and cat men on both sides and hold them prisoner until you're relieved, 068," Sand told the rolling dingbat.

"Is that what you wish also, miss?"

Ann Veronica nodded. "Yes, Subaltern 068. And do it humanely, understand?"

"Humanely?"

"Well, as humanely as possible."

The wagon kept on, picking up speed as the road grew smoother.

"Good luck, miss," called 068.

After a few moments Ann Veronica asked Sand, "You're figuring to come back in with police and take in all those dingbats and outlaws and war buffs?"

"No."

"Wasn't that your job?"

"My job," answered Sand, "was to locate the lost dingbats. Which I've done. I figure everybody will keep fighting down there for most of the day and then the dingbats should win and lock the rest of them up. When we hit Esforma, I'll telegraph my Political Espionage Office contact and tell him where the dingbats are."

"You're not the most ambitious secret agent I've ever met."

"I'm not an agent at all," Sand said. "I'm basically a planet bum who works now and then to make expenses. Where do you want to go?"

Ann Veronica shrugged with her hands. "I don't know. Where are you going to stop after Esforma Station?"

Sand's eye narrowed. "Here and there," he told her. "I'm on vacation again."

"That's about what I feel up to," she said.

"Come along then."

She laughed. "We should have brought that dingbat chaplain with us. I mean, a girl has to be prepared for anything."

He laughed too. And kissed her. •

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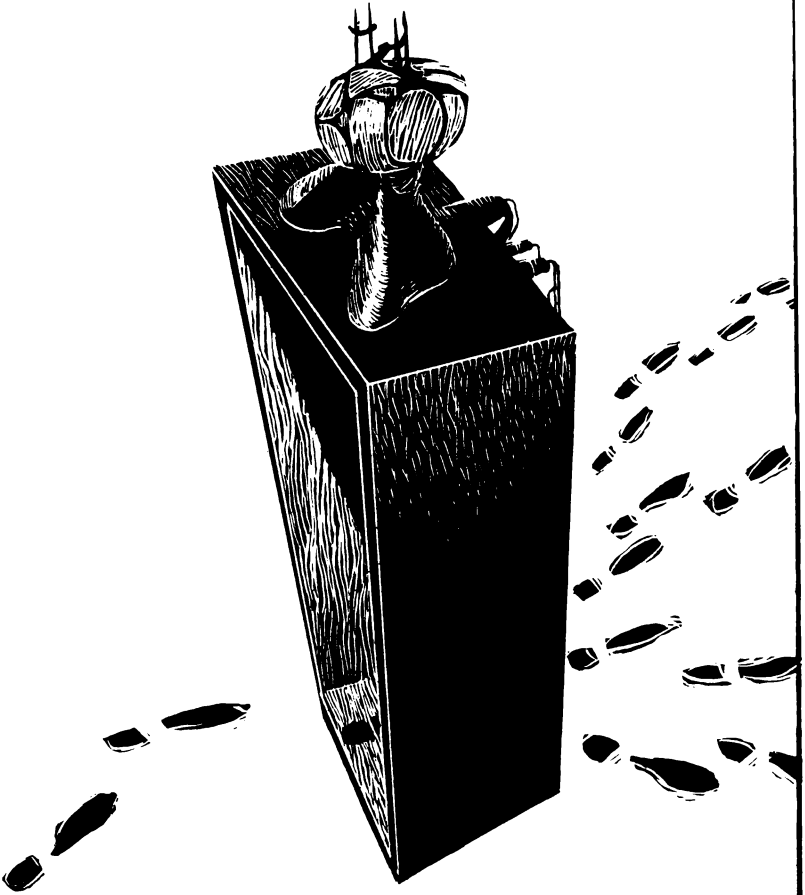
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MAN OF MANY PARTS

SUSAN ELLISON

WHEN Rex Hereford took to working nights and weekends, the Head of Instrument Development and Research became alarmed. Not because working overtime was so unusual for this group, but because Rex was working on his own private project. And Rex was an odd bird.

But the Head acted cautiously and with circumspection. He checked all requisitions of parts and even stayed after five himself, once or twice, wandering through the spotless corridors and peering into the immaculate laboratories. Although he pretended to himself that company secrets were being stolen, he knew Rex Hereford would never stoop to that sort of thing.

"Crazy, maybe—but he's a moral sort of guy," the Head said to himself.

Rex's behavior was a delicate matter. It had to be handled with discretion. So at 5:03 one evening Irving Gumbo, Rex's extraordinary technician, found himself in the Head's lavishly appointed office with a generous drink, poured from the Head's own special stock, in front of him. Irving hesitated.

"Nonsense," said the Head. "It's after hours. And we'll keep this meeting a secret between you and me."

"Thank you, sir," said Irving.

He swallowed the liquor in one gulp. Lines of warmth radiated from his navel. The Head beamed at him genially.

"Now, Irving," he said, "I want a

bit of information from you. No tattling, just an exchange between friends."

Irving nodded.

"For some time now," said the Head, "Rex Hereford has been staying nights to work on a project of his own. I'm quite curious about it."

"So am I, sir," said Irving. He leaned forward confidentially. "I stay here with him pretty late on occasion. He pays me out of his own pocket to wire up certain sections of some apparatus he's been developing. But he's never told me what it's supposed to be for. Of course, sir, I've worked strictly on my own time—"

"Of course," said the Head. "And where does he get his electrical components?"

"If you check the requisitions you'll find he's paid for everything he's used."

"I'd never do a thing like that," said the Head. "I've never doubted Rex for a moment. I'm just wondering about patent rights and all that."

Irving sighed, "I couldn't help you there, sir. I'm afraid I just don't know enough about his project—"

"That's all right," said the Head. "If you should find out, I'd appreciate hearing from you. And believe me, you've been quite helpful to me. Most helpful indeed."

He picked up his decanter of good stuff and to Irving's dismay returned it safely to the cupboard.

"Hereford is our most creative engineer," the Head said. "For the

moment I see no point in alarming or antagonizing him. So don't mention our little conference to him, will you?"

IRVING GUMBO was baffled by the entire affair and, like the Head, was terribly curious. He had admired and envied Rex Hereford for many years. Rex was a splendid engineer. Also, he had the manner and poise of a dashing man-about-town. He had a hungry eye and a hungrier imagination for more than instrumentation design. The rhythmic twitch of a passing backside or the implied cleavage of a swelling bosom were enough to set him on fire.

Rex was rather handsome—tall, debonair, with luxuriant red hair and a fierce red moustache that drooped over the corners of his mouth. He emulated the nineteenth century dandies, wearing a succession of elegant checkered vests, a monocle he did not need, and pearl-gray spats in fair weather and foul. There was not a woman in the entire plant who did not find Rex irresistible.

About himself Irving had no illusions. He knew that he possessed exceptional manual skills, that he had quick insights into circuitry, that he had few peers at troubleshooting a malfunctioning piece of equipment. But his appearance sharply differed from Rex Hereford's. Irving's squat form was topped by a face that

might have been hewn from badly quarried granite. His black hair was stringy and unkempt. And he wore the same unpressed sharkskin suit for weeks on end. He envied the indefinable allure of Rex Hereford and often wondered why Rex remained faithful to Becky, his flat-chested wife.

Irving had gained some insight into the situation during one of those rare, intimate moments when the prototype of a new instrument suddenly starts to function at two A.M. after months of work, causing the men responsible to feel unusually close to one another.

"You're as good with apparatus as you're supposed to be with women," Irving had exclaimed. "I guess you were born with the touch."

"I wasn't always comfortable with women," he said. "My father was a dedicated atheist. But to prove he was not immoral on that account, he set up a code of behavior that even a saint couldn't stick to. There I was, despite myself, always trying to live up to it. Because I coveted every woman that passed, I assumed I was some kind of animal."

"But desire is a natural thing," said Irving.

"I realized that later," said Rex. "Three years on the analytic couch convinced me there was nothing wrong in feeling desire. It was the deed that was sinful, not the dream. So I taught myself to make love mentally to all women. Yet the truth is that even now I couldn't possibly

bed down with a woman I wasn't married to. The moral code implanted in my youth still controls me. I love Becky. She's a good woman, sometimes even an exciting woman. But in my bones I know I was born to enjoy many women. I'll never be happy until I can find a way to do just that."

"Have you thought of bigamy?" asked Irving.

Rex Hereford stiffened. His forehead and ears turned a red more flaming than his moustache.

"Why do you ask that?" he muttered, staring into the technician's face.

Irving shrugged noncommittally. "No reason at all. I was just making conversation."

There was a silence of several seconds before Rex spoke again.

"I have thought of bigamy," he said slowly, eyes glazed as though he were in a trance. "But it violates my code, for one thing. For another, there are too many legal complications."

This last remark struck Irving Gumbo as poor justification for inactivity. In his mind's eye he too saw himself as a Don Juan—though trapped within a homely exterior—and if there were even the remotest chance of success he knew he would go to any lengths to satisfy his longings. But he said nothing, and the dialogue with Rex petered out.

He continued to work evenings along with Rex, building large sections of the engineer's mystery de-

vice, bothering no longer to ask questions.

Then one day the project terminated as abruptly as it had begun. The sections of the instrument disappeared. Rex Hereford stopped coming in nights and weekends. He seemed merrier, freer, like a bird released from its cage.

Irving's curiosity grew even more intense.

HE recalled well enough his meeting with the Head, knew that implicit in that conversation had been the command to find out what Rex had been working on. Irving decided that for the next several days, during his off hours, he would shadow Rex as unobtrusively as possible.

The technician adopted an impenetrable disguise. From an exclusive men's shop he purchased a magnificent double-knit suit with close-fitting tailored vest, suede shoes, and a deep blue foulard that knotted casually at the throat. A red-satin lined opera cape caught his fancy, as did a huge soft felt hat with a broad pliant brim he bent into a sweeping arc. He gazed at his image in the full-length store mirror and was enchanted by the colorful reflections, confident no one could ever guess his identity.

He followed Rex Hereford in taxicabs at a respectable distance and tipped the drivers lavishly. He tiptoed cautiously around building

corners, face averted from the overhead lamps, the great brim of his hat shielding his granitic features from the curious passersby. One thing he soon discovered. Every night Rex went home directly to his wife and never emerged until the following morning.

Irving's eyes became red-rimmed and swollen from lack of sleep. Twice he was questioned by suspicious patrolmen and forced to move on in spite of his entirely plausible story . . . looking for an appropriate site in the neighborhood for a new Opera House. He was rapidly growing discouraged. One night, when he had given up the surveillance of Rex to attend a hockey game, he discovered the engineer at a rinksid seat with a magnificently proportioned blonde at his side.

It was clear they were enjoying themselves enormously. After a crushing victory for the home club Rex and his buxom friend went off to a nearby nightclub. Irving followed at a discreet distance and, although not dressed appropriately since he was back in the unpressed sharkskin, entered the club. A twenty dollar bill procured a table that enabled him to keep the illicit pair in his peripheral vision.

They drank champagne, danced every dance with frenzied abandon, and eventually the blonde bit Rex's earlobe, an act that brought Irving to his feet. With a breast full of jealousy, anger and sheer nosiness, he

walked over to the table and fixed his sad eyes on Rex's merry face. Rex leaped to his feet and pumped Irving's hand joyously.

"Irving, my dear friend," he said. "It's so good to run into you. I want you to meet Mary Lou, my wife."

"Wife?" croaked Irving.

"Since Tuesday last," smiled Rex.

Mary Lou opened two enormous blue eyes and looked warmly into Irving's tiny brown ones, touching off in Irving a feeling of longing for this ravishing creature. She held out a soft hand. He kissed it in Continental style. Rex nodded approvingly. After muttering his congratulations and drinking a single glass of champagne with the frolicking couple Irving made his apologies and fled into the night. Although tired beyond description he went directly to the Hereford Cape Codder and took his station across the street to see what time Rex would return home. Rex never did return, or so it seemed. But in the morning the door opened and Rex appeared at the threshold, kissing Becky goodbye.

Irving was enraged.

"Fraud," he cried to himself. "Pharisee, Tartuffe!" He had run out of epithets but he knew one thing for certain—Rex Hereford was not the moral man Irving had taken him to be.

Thereafter Irving found it difficult to work with Rex, particularly since the latter showed neither signs of embarrassment nor any disposition to take the technician aside and

confess all. Rex was blithe, carefree and more hard-working than ever.

ON the following Sunday, as Irving strolled through the vast expanses of Sugarlane Park carrying a paper bag of stale breadcrumbs to feed the waterfowl, he heard the hearty booming laugh of Rex Hereford. Irving crept up to a hedge and peered over it to see, to his utter amazement, Rex lying on the grass and tickling in an unmentionable spot a voluptuous brunette Irving had never laid eyes on before.

He could not bear it. Casting good sense and discretion to the winds, he burst through the hedge and accosted the licentious pair. Rex beamed genially at the squat apparition and did not even bother to withdraw his hand from the gorgeous anatomy.

"Irving, as I live and breathe," he cried. "Let me introduce my dear wife, Letitia."

Wife? Irving's mind would have boggled had it retained the capacity to do so. Once again he took hold of a lissome hand and kissed it, murmuring pleasantries and best wishes. But as he backed off his conscience tormented him.

Reluctantly he proceeded to the Hereford home and rapped gently with the gargoyle knocker. Becky came to the door and eyed him, bemused by the huge hat and the opera cape.

"Is that you, Irving Gumbo?" she said at last.

"In the flesh," he replied, trying

to summon up a jocular air but succeeding only in stumbling over a fold in the cape. "Thought I'd stop by to see you folks. But I suppose Rex is off somewhere?"

He hoped he was being circumpect. He did not want to hurt her, but ultimately she would have to be told. She smiled at him.

"If you must know," she said, "Rex is still in bed. He and I have been enjoying the morning together."

It was more than Irving could handle. Either Rex had found some means of deluding his wife or Irving was hallucinating. He backed out, phrasing apologies about a forgotten appointment, and although Becky tried to get him to stay for a cup of coffee he ignored her protestations and stumbled into the tree-lined street.

The following day he put the question directly to Rex. The engineer simply arched an eyebrow, removed his monocle and cleaned it expertly.

"You did not see me in the park yesterday," he said firmly.

"But I did," cried Irving indignantly. "And last week at the hockey game and also at a nightclub."

"Neither of those men were me," said Rex. There was a whimsical glint in his eye.

"I spoke to you," said Irving. "And to your—your wife. You bigamist, you!"

It was out in the open. He had said it. He leaned back, expecting violent

denials, recriminations, perhaps a physical blow. But none of these things followed.

"I've got to tell somebody sooner or later," said Rex. "It might as well be you. So far at least you've shown a reasonable amount of discretion. And the story will come out in the open some day anyway." He bit distractedly at the ends of his red moustache. "All right, Irving," he said. "Come along with me. We're calling it a day."

THEY climbed into Rex's natty red sports car and headed in the direction of his home. Rex drove silently, wrapped in thought. Irving said nothing, wondering what the denouement of this strange tale would be. They left the car together, both still silent. Rex led the way to the garage at the side of his home, opened the combination lock and drew Irving inside before turning on the overhead light.

"It's right here," said Rex, "under this vinyl covering."

Irving looked closely at the device. It was a tall, broad cabinet with three vernier dials and a single power switch. He could relate nothing in its appearance to the sections he had wired.

"I assembled it entirely on my own," said Rex. "It was a back-breaking job. But the really difficult part of the operation was acquiring the enormous energy this unit demands. I withdrew every cent of my savings and took out a very large loan

to purchase the enriched plutonium necessary for fuel. But the other fellows are helping me pay off the loan."

"Other fellows?"

"Nine, to be exact," said Rex. "Starting with myself, we're numbered zero to nine for identification purposes. You see, this device is a duplicating machine. It utilizes certain ideas on sampling to produce a statistically reasonable duplicate of anything that's placed inside the sample chamber—"

He quickly grabbed a chair and placed it under the sagging figure of Irving Gumbo. Then Rex took a bottle of brandy from the shelf and poured the technician a stiff drink.

"Now," said Rex after the color had returned to Irving's cheeks, "you might ask me why I didn't use this machine to duplicate something really valuable, gold for example. The answer is, of course, that the cost in energy would be worth more than the value of the output. But what about duplicating people? *There* is a feat not to be measured in dollars and cents. Not that the risks aren't high, mind you, because each of the duplicates is not a true atom-for-atom copy. Only on the average would such an event take place. Therefore in principle it would take an infinitely large number of reproductions to produce a perfect copy of a human being. But it was worth the risk!"

"Why did you want duplicates of yourself?" asked Irving. He still be-

lieved he was the victim of a monstrous practical joke.

"To set myself free," said Rex. "Don't you see? My blasted code of ethics kept me from the lusty kind of living I always craved. But as ten different men—and yet basically the same man—I could have my cake and eat it too. Right now nine of us are married to nine different women so that in effect, without violating a single tenet of my code, I have been able to live intimately with nine women. Incidentally, the number should be ten very shortly."

"And what about your own wife, Becky? Have you told her yet?"

"Don't worry about Becky," said Rex. "She'll understand. Remember, Rex Hereford Number Zero is still strictly her boy."

"And what if she wanders into Sugarlane Park the way I did and finds one of the other Rexes grabbing his wife Letitia in a lascivious way?"

Rex's face fell.

"It shouldn't have happened. Each of the other fellows was supposed to take a job in a separate part of the country. Seven of them did. Periodically we meet in our Family Circle council and exchange experiences with one another, the experiences we share as one man. Unfortunately one of the duplicates is slightly aberrated and a second is a flamboyant extrovert. He's the one you saw in the park with Letitia, who is not his wife at all. I must confess that he's a particular source of worry to me. But

he'll learn to toe the line. Meanwhile I plan to tell Becky before she or some friend or relative runs into either of these two men."

He placed the vinyl wrapper back on the duplicating machine as though he were covering a sleeping Venus, then escorted Irving back to the street.

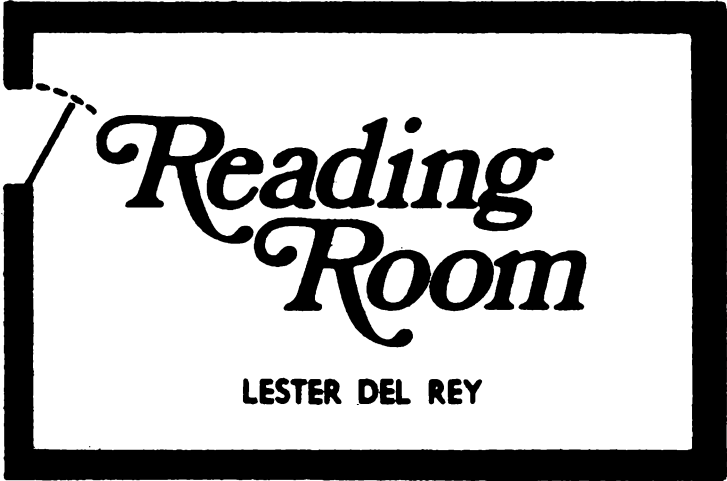
"We'll have to say good night for now," said Rex. "I haven't yet nerved myself to tell Becky. You may be surprised to hear this, but since I've achieved this other outlet I'm more deeply in love with Becky than ever. And she's going to be pleasantly surprised to see me home early."

"I'll never again be surprised at anything I see," said Irving.

HE WATCHED enviously as Rex walked to the front door and quietly let himself in. Then Irving started slowly up the tree-shaded street, musing over what ten copies of himself might do if turned loose on the women of America.

Violent shouting roused him from his reverie. He had heard family quarrels before, because the walls of his apartment were paper thin and the acoustics of transmission superb. He had always been both fascinated and repelled by the flaming emotions, particularly when a husband had caught his wife in an act of infidelity.

But never, never in his entire lifetime, had he heard the same male voice shouting—and answering itself.



Reading Room

LESTER DEL REY

SCIENCE fiction has often been put down as mere category fiction, a minor division of the great field of literature. (Some prefer the academic term *genre*, which means the same, but applies more specifically to the arts.)

Well, science fiction may be good or bad, depending on the skill and honesty of the writer. But whether it's a category is another matter. The dictionary first defines category as "an ultimate concept or form of thought," and I can neither accept nor decline that application of meaning—but if the second definition of "a class or division" is meant to indicate limit or restriction, it most certainly does not apply.

Rather than being a limited class of fiction, science fiction is an enor-

mous field where almost every possible division of literature can be contained. It can embrace adventure, romance, sport or mystery; it can involve spies and grand politics, historical encounters (of imaginary history, of course—but as real as most history in fiction) and can even be used as a variation of western fiction. Asimov's mystery novels and Piper's historicals are at least as valid as the mainstream forms on lending library shelves.

Science fiction can then go beyond certain limits to embrace stories that cannot be done in the so-called mainstream or any other previously known category. For instance, *all* other forms of fiction are based upon man's struggle to deal with himself or with his terrestrial

environment. Only science fiction can and does reach beyond such narrow and provincial bounds.

In fact, if I were to try to find an inclusive definition of our field, rather than the exclusive one I've used before, I would have to define science fiction as: fiction that concerns itself with all time, all space and all possibilities. Its only and self-imposed restriction is that it rarely deals with the limited areas of general fiction, since those are already sufficiently exhausted.

There are a large number of divisions—or categories—within this enormous field and I have no idea of how many. Long ago, trying to list them, I gave up after naming thirty-plus, but there must be many more that could be recognized as definite and familiar types by readers with an extensive familiarity with science fiction. If anyone else has drawn up such a listing, I'd like to see it—perhaps eventually we could derive acceptable names for purposes of cataloguing.

Certainly some of the oldest and most generally accepted sf is made up of what I call the Sudden Doom story. This involves some sudden development or discovery that threatens total ruin to Earth as we know it. The major early example of this would be H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. More recently, Wyndham, Ballard and Christopher have given us

good examples, and *The Andromeda Strain* by Crichton was one of the more successful ones in terms of sales.

Now we have *Mutant 59: The Plastic Eaters*, by Kit Pedler and Gerry Davis (Bantam, \$1.50). This is a fairly good example of the type, depending chiefly on suspense. Like all the best doom stories, it is set in the very near future and involves only a single supposition. A scientist becomes interested in the difficulty of disposing of used plastic bags in his sewage and attempts to breed a strain of bacteria that can live off and destroy such plastic. (Not too hard to believe when we realize some of the things that known bacteria can digest.) He succeeds and the bacteria break free and begin attacking all plastic in London—and eventually, of course, will spread over the whole world.

It's a nice, simple idea, depicting a realistic threat. Almost all insulation is a form of plastic. When that is gone, nothing electrical or electronic can work properly. Automobiles and planes cannot operate—indeed, so much plastic is used in modern planes that they would probably fall to pieces in flight. Almost every form of modern life is threatened.

Unlike the Crichton story, this novel is on fairly firm ground in its use of science. In theory, at least, most of it could happen. And the

authors play fair with the reader, again unlike Crichton. This time the menace does not change all by itself and prove to be only a paper dragon, looking fierce at first, but turning out to be really quite harmless to provide a phony ending. The ending is a bit weak, but more from the human presentation of it than from the lack of validity against the problem posed. The human problems seem to have a solution that is almost an anticlimax after the major problem posed by the doom situation.

In fact, the weakness of the novel lies in the characters, not the situation. In the beginning of the story, they are too many and too typecast for us to follow easily. This seems to clear up during the middle of the book when a small group is faced with the problem of survival while trapped underground, but once that difficulty is solved, no further development of character is shown. The human elements of the story remain mere pegs to hang the story on instead of people about whom we can be vitally concerned.

One of the best sections of the novel takes place on board an airplane where a scientist with evidence on the nature of the menace discovers that he has unwittingly brought the bacteria on board—and must watch the plastic of the plane become useless goo before his eyes.

As a suspense story, it is good. In

all other ways it is only fair, though a good deal better than most other popular examples of this type we've seen for some time. Recommended for quick reading.

ANOTHER grouping consists of what I call the World After Chaos novel. (Sometimes this is referred to as Our Barbarous Descendants, but since the category doesn't demand barbarians, I prefer a more general heading.) This type of story, of course, deals with what happens to our world after some cataclysm has destroyed our civilization—we may have had atomic warfare, been struck by some great plague or whatever, but most of what we know has been wiped out and Earth is starting over. Examples ran rife shortly after World War II, but perhaps the best was *Davy*, by Edgar Pangborn—up until now.

Hiero's Journey, by Sterling Lanier (Chilton, \$6.95), is an outstanding example of this type of novel.

Lanier is a trained zoologist and obviously has the interests of a full naturalist—in the best sense in which that word was once used. He lays his story in the year 7476, long after the destruction of civilization by a great atomic war. The mutations from radiation have already taken place and the ecology is now fully stabilized around a mixture of familiar and mutated life forms. But the

time that permitted this adjustment has not been so great that all records and memories of the past have been destroyed.

Now the descendants of certain French-Canadians and Indians, who occupy what was midwestern Canada, are striving to build a secure culture against the subtle and secret attacks of what they call the Unclean—apparently humans who have mutated somewhat and who hate all normal mankind. The nonmutants survived because they were scattered, rural groups well removed from the cities that were destroyed—but they began environmental reconstruction with little of our civilized knowledge and were sorely ignorant of much of what they had to know to survive.

Hiero, a priest-scientist and warrior, is sent out alone on a mission. He must cross a largely unknown and hostile wilderness to the ruins of the ancient cities in search of something vaguely known as a computer; such a device is the only hope of coordinating the shreds of knowledge still preserved to make resisting the Unclean possible.

It is quite a trip. And the joy for the reader comes not merely from the high adventure, but from the richness and reality of the world Lanier has created. This isn't a mere distortion of our own world in poorer terms, nor some imitation of one of our earlier times—it's a world

that hangs together with color and feeling of its own. Weapons, lifestyle, beasts, plants, climate and even such things as religion all fit into a viable *Weltansicht* and *Zeitgeist* of Lanier's own.

There are characters enough here to please any romantic, too. There's a tamed morse (moose-horse), a marvelous bear, a girl from the lands once civilized, a tree woman, pirates, good-guy Eleveners and Unclean bad guys. Happily, nothing is ever too simple, nor is everything always what it seems.

There is a good adventure story behind it all, with a satisfactory ending that isn't too easily foreseen, though Lanier has left himself opportunities for later adventures to follow this. I hope he does go on to make it a series, if he can give us more as good as *Hiero's Journey*.

It is the best example of this type of story that I have seen. Highly recommended.

ONE early category has currently been enjoying a great revival. This is what I call the Sword And Planet novel. It's somewhat like Sword And Sorcery, but with less emphasis on sorcery (sometimes replaced by arcane "science"), and with the exotic cultural background laid on another planet instead of in a mythical past of Earth. At its best, its hero is a reasonably intelligent

man, rather than the barbarian of the Conan-type story. Edgar Rice Burroughs brought this story form its early popularity and a flood of books recently have either imitated his work or derived from it.

Messenger of Zhuvastou, by Andrew J. Offutt (Berkley, 75c) is of the type, but is less derivative than many others. Offutt begins with a rich and highly educated young man from Earth seeking entry to a quite primitive planet, where Earthmen are sworn not to upset the native culture by introducing their technology. His excuse is that he's searching for his fiancée, who is now on Zhuvastou.

With a lot of warning, he's finally admitted. And then his troubles begin. The natives aren't all noble savages—they tend more to be realistic semi-savages, dirty, crude and violent. And there is evidence that other Earthmen who have come there are probably engaged in something even more violent than the natives have developed for themselves. It also turns out that there's a lot more to that story of his "fiancée" than he told the entry guards.

There is plenty of swordplay and fighting, intrigue and confusion, as in the best Sword And Planet work. There's also a bawdy good-humor not usually found. (The chapter headings seem to be a bit too well designed for comedy—forget them,


though they fit the story—the story itself is honest high adventure.)

Zhuvastou is a good planet for background, somewhere between a Burroughs type and one whose culture is treated in more serious science fiction. I think this evolution is a happy one. The natives are convincing, their conflicts are believable and the part in their plotting and politics played by Earth and a few people from Earth fits in excellently. Finally, Offutt may seem at times to stray casually from one adventure to another, but in the end he sews everything into a related whole.

To all the readers who love this type of fiction: Offutt's novel should not be missed. It brings a breath of freshness into a field that needs it, without ruining the attraction that is still inherent in it.

ANOTHER of Offutt's novels pleases me much less. This is *Ardor on Argos* (Dell, 95c). Incidentally, despite its higher price, it's also a much shorter book than *Zhuvastou*—that may be part of the trouble, since good Sword And Planet seems to require space in which to develop its full flavor.

This book obviously cleaves much closer to the ancient formula, with an introduction on how Offutt got the story from the real hero, etc., rather than wrote it. Then it goes



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into the oldest corn in sf—the young innocent who reads an ad, gets a job working for a strange scientist and finally is hurled into another world. When he lands our hero takes time to speculate on all the works of Burroughs before he realizes he isn't on Mars. (This is fiction eating itself, as I see it, and it isn't usually good technique.) After that, we finally get down to the adventure, which seems pretty good for a while. But then we begin to run into anomalies—jungles that aren't there, though they seem to be, for instance. It all begins to take on a dreamlike quality.

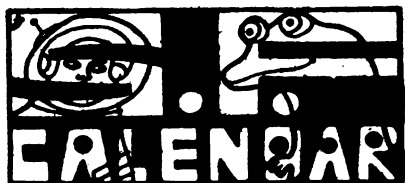
In the end we find that it is dreamlike—the quality is explained adequately, but still weakens the action-romance we want from this type of story. (Also, it presents an old plotting flaw—when anything can

happen, as in a dream, nothing really matters and any problem can be solved by some other sudden development that is purely fortuitous.)

The ending has some element of cleverness, but the whole lacks that inner conviction adventure stories need. The novel isn't bad, but it's a lot less good than it should have been.

ACATEGORY that has to be unique to science fiction is that which deals with the attempts of humans and aliens to find a method of living together on one planet. The closest approach in general fiction is the problem of two races or two cultures merging—but this involves no problem of physically determined differences, and even cultural differences must be closer, since all

information write: Ian Williams, 6 Greta Terrace, Chester Road, Sunderland SR4-7RD, England.



November 23-25, 1973. International Science Fiction and Fantasy Film Convention. P.O. Box 74866, Los Angeles, Calif. Artists may rent exhibit space.

Easter Weekend, 1973. EASTER-CON, at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Pro Guest of Honor: Bob Shaw. Fan Guest of Honor: Peter Weston. For

May 24-27, 1974. EYECON, at International Hotel, Los Angeles, Calif. For information write: EYECON, 10170 Gould Street, Apt. C, Riverside, Calif. 92503. (Not to be confused, we are told, with EQUICON, about which we will have more info next issue.)

To list your convention or other S-F event, write to: *S-F Calendar, Worlds of If, 235 East 45 Street, New York, N.Y. 10017.*

humans share a common evolution.

Poul Anderson's *The People of the Wind* (Signet, 95c) explores the categorical theme the hard way—by attempting to realize the nonhumans and their culture in careful detail. In this case, the aliens are birdlike people called the Ythri.

Anderson seems fascinated with intelligent avians, probably because a culture developed by winged creatures capable of flight, yet with some kind of technical civilization, presents major difficulties of portrayal. He tried it in *The War of the Winged Men*, but his interest there was in his human, van Rijn. As a result, the avians were mostly sketched in. Recently he returned to the problem, giving it much more thought. He came up with a short story in which he showed how flight might be possible for creatures heavy enough to have complex brains and ability to handle tools—and his “superchargers” for supplying oxygen for such work was a fine detail. This story told of the discovery of the aliens.

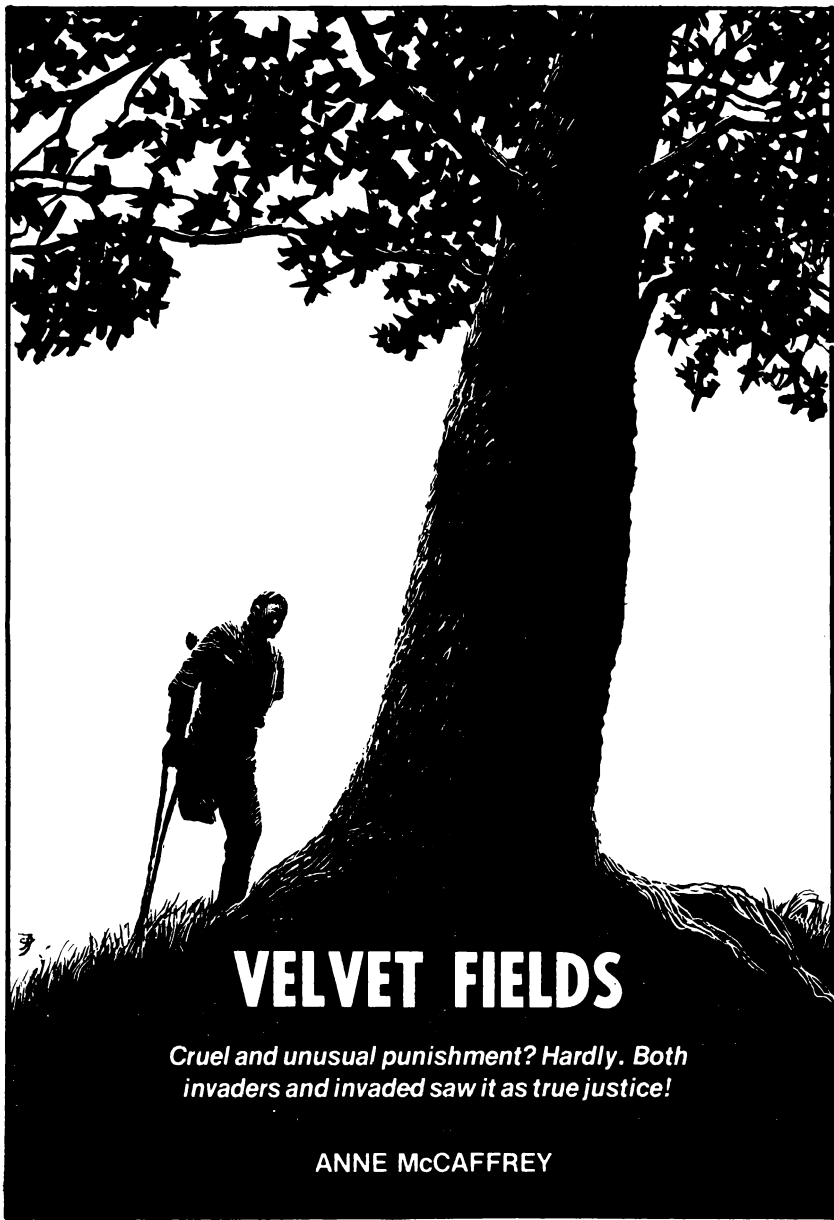
Now the novel takes place after men and Ythrians have settled together on the planet of Avalon. Several generations have passed, and the young people of both races are beginning to associate freely, with a great blurring of their natural cultures. These are moments of high emotional tension and sometimes of tragedy. The Ythrian “prostitute”

must arouse more pity than could ever be given to any human in the same plight, for instance. And the displaced humans who feel the attraction toward Ythrian flightmates possess real and moving feelings we can share.

Unfortunately, it seems to me, Anderson has “pulped” a marvelous background that should have been handled for its own dramatic values; he has added a space war, in which the two races on Avalon are being attacked by the whole Terran Empire. This has produced melodrama and clever plotting where we should have had something deeper than the action of spaceships being destroyed or the politics of Earth—interesting, but not too unusual.

There is enough material on Ythrian culture and on the problems of the two races cohabiting a planet to show that this intrusion of extraneous action was not caused by Anderson's inability to handle his main story. What there is of biracial adjustment is superb, with obvious evidence that Anderson has thought out the problem in great detail. I wish he'd stuck to that story.

This could have been a landmark work of science fiction—the first to explore the problem in the detail and with the understanding and empathy it deserves. As it is, despite the war, it's a very good book—but unfortunately, no more. ●



VELVET FIELDS

Cruel and unusual punishment? Hardly. Both invaders and invaded saw it as true justice!

ANNE McCAFFREY

OF course we moved into the cities of Zobranoirundisi when Worlds Federated finally permitted a colony there. Although Survey had kept a watch on the planet for more than thirty years standard and the cities were obviously on a standby directive, the absentee owners remained conspicuous by their absence. Since Resources and Supplies had agitated in Council for another breadbasket planet in that sector of the galaxy and Zobranoirundisi was unoccupied we were sent in, chartered to be self-sufficient in one sidereal year and to produce a surplus in two.

It would, therefore, have been a great misdirection of effort not to have inhabited the cities—we only moved into four—so patently suitable for humanoid life forms. The murals that decorated a conspicuous wall in every dwelling gave only a vague idea of the physiology of our landlords, always depicted in an attitude of reverent obeisance toward a dominating Tree symbol so that only the backs, the rounded fuzzy-covered craniums and the suggestion of arms extended in front of the bodies were visible.

I suppose if we had not been so concerned with establishing the herds, getting in the crops and so forth, generally breaking our necks to meet the Colony Charter requirements, we might have discovered sooner that there had been a gross error. The clues were there. For example, although we inhabited the

cities they could not be brought to “operational” fully despite all the efforts of Dunlapil, the metropolitan engineer. Then too, we could find no single example of the Tree anywhere on the lush planet. But with R&S on our backs to produce, produce, produce, we didn’t take time to delve into the perplexing anomalies.

Dunlapil, with his usual urbane contempt for the botanical, quipped to Martin Chavez, our ecologist, that the Tree was the Tree of Life and therefore mythical.

“Carry the analogy further,” he would tease Martin, “and it explains why the Zobranoirundisi left. Some dissident plucked the Apple and got ’em all kicked out of the Garden of Eden.”

Eden might well have been modeled on Zobranoirundisi with its velvet fields, parklike forests and rolling plains. Amid these sat lovely little cities constructed of pressed fibrous blocks tinted in pleasant colors during a manufacturing process whose nature frustrated Dunlapil as much as the absence of the Tree perplexed Chavez.

So, suppressing our pervasive sense of trespassing, we moved into the abandoned dwellings, careful not to make any irreparable changes to accommodate our equipment. In fact the only sophisticated, non-indigenous equipment that I as Colony Commissioner permitted within any city was the plastistele Comtower. I ordered the rocketport constructed beyond a low range of

foothills on the rather scrubby plain at some distance from my headquarters city. An old riverbed proved an acceptable road for moving cargo to and from the port and no one really objected to the distance. It would be far better not to offend our landlords with the dirt and chaos of outer-space commerce close to their pretty city.

We pastured the cattle in the neatly separated velvet fields. Martin Chavez worried when close inspection disclosed that each velvet field was underpinned by its own ten-meter-thick foundation of ancient rock-hard clay. Those same foundations housed what seemed to be a deep irrigation system under every field.

I did ask Martin Chavez to investigate the curious absence of herbivores from a planet so perfectly suited to them. He had catalogued several types of omnivores, a wide variety of fowl and a plethora of fishes. He did discover some fossil remains of herbivores but nothing more recent than traces comparable to those of our Pleistocene epoch.

He was therefore forced to conclude—and submitted his voluminous report with numerous comparisons to nearby galactic examples—that some catastrophe, perhaps the same that had wiped out the humanoids, had eliminated the herbivores at an earlier stage.

Whatever the disaster had been—bacterial, viral or something more esoteric—it did not recur to plague

us. We thrived on Zobranoirundisi. The first children, conceived under the bluish alien sun, were born just after we had shipped our first year's surplus off-world. Life settled into a pleasant seasonal routine: the beef, sheep, horses, kine, even the windoers of Grace's World imported to Zobranoirundisi on an experimental basis, multiplied on the velvet fields. The xenogarian crops from half a dozen worlds gave us abundant yields. We had some failures, of course, with inedible or grotesque ergotian mutations, but not enough to be worth more than a minor Chavezian thesis in the record and a shrug of the pioneering farmer. If a colonist is eating well, living comfortably, with leisure time for his kids and time off with his wife on the languid Southern seas, he puts up with minor failures and irritations. Even with the omnipresent guilt of trespassing.

I was not the only one who never felt entirely at ease in the pretty cities. But, as I rationalized the intermittent twinges of conscience, it would have been ridiculous to build facilities when empty accommodations were already available, despite their obstinate refusal to work no matter how Dunlapil tried. Still, we managed fine and gradually came to ignore the anomalies we had never fully explored, settling down to make our gardens and families grow.

THE TENTH YEAR was just beginning with surprising warmth

when Martin Chavez called a meeting of myself, himself, and Dunlapil as Engineering Specialist. Chavez had even convened it on a Restday, which was annoying as well as unusual.

"Just in case we have to call a meeting of the Colony," he told me when I protested the scheduling. That statement together with his insistence was enough to make me feel apprehensive. Although Martin Chavez was a worrier he was no fool; he did not force his problems on anyone unnecessarily, nor was he for calling useless meetings.

"I have an unusual report to make on a new plant growth discernible in the velvet fields, Commissioner Sabubbi," he announced formally. "Such a manifestation is not generally associated with a simple monocotyledonous plant. I've cross-checked both used and unused pastures, and the distortions of the growth in the used fields are distressing."

"You mean we've imported a virus that's mutating the indigenous grasses?" I asked. "Or has the old virus that killed off the herbivorous life returned?"

"Nothing like this mutation has ever been classified and no, I don't think it's a repeat of a previous calamity." Chavez said, frowning with worry.

"Ah, c'mon, Marty," Dunlapil said with some disgust. "Don't go calling for a planetary quarantine just when we're showing a nice credit balance."

Chavez drew himself up indignantly.

"He hasn't suggested anything of the sort, Dun," I said, wondering if the urban engineer was annoyed because Chavez seemed closer to solving the enigma of the Tree than Dunlapil was to the mechanics of the cities. "Please explain, Specialist Chavez."

"I have lately discerned a form of weird evolution from the family Graminaceae, which these plants have resembled until now." He snapped on the handviewer and projected a slide onto the only wall in my office bare of the ubiquitous murals. "The nodular extrusions now developing in the velvet fields show none of the characteristics of herbaceous plants. No joined stems or slender sheathing leaves." He looked around to see if we had seen enough before he flashed on a slide of magnified cellular material. "This cross-section suggests genus Helianthus, an improbable mutation." Chavez shrugged his helplessness in presenting such contradictory material. "However, something new is under every sun and we have not yet determined how the unusual blue light of this primary will affect growth after prolonged exposure. We might get a Bragae II effect."

"The next thing you'll be telling me, Martin," Dunlapil said as if to forestall a discourse on galactic comparisons, "is that these plants are the aliens who built these cities." He grinned at me.

"That ought to be obvious," Chavez said with such a lack of rancor that the disbelief I had been entertaining disappeared. "Commissioner—" Chavez's grave eyes met mine—"can you give me another reason why every city has similarly fenced lots, all placed to catch full daily sun? Why the velvet fields with that central dominant Tree symbol appear to be the reverent focus of the aliens—excuse me—the indigenous species?"

"But they're clearly humanoid," Dunlapil said in protest.

"Their culture is agrarian. *And* there are no grazing beasts. Nor a single example of that blasted Tree anywhere on the planet—yet!"

That was when I truly began to fear.

"There are no grazing beasts," Chavez went on inexorably, "because they have been eliminated to protect the velvet fields and whatever is growing within them now."

"You mean, when those fields bloom with whatever it is they bloom with, the aliens will return?" Dunlapil asked.

Chavez nodded. "If we haven't irreparably altered the growth cycle."

"But that's fantastic! An entire civilization can't be dependent on a crazy who-knows-how-long cycle of plant life!" Dunlapil spluttered.

"Nothing is impossible," replied Chavez at his most didactic.

"Your research has been sufficiently comprehensive?" I asked him,

although I was sick with a sense of impending disaster.

"As comprehensive as my limited equipment and knowledge allow. I would welcome a chance to submit my findings to competent xenobiologists and xenobotanists with greater experience in esoteric plant-life forms. And I respectfully request that you have Colonial Central send us a team at once. I'm afraid that we've already done incalculable damage to the—" he gave a grim smile; he would not make the same mistake again—"indigenous organism seeded in those fields."

The semantic nicety was no help to my frame of mind. If Chavez were even remotely correct, we would require not only xenobotanists and xenobiologists but an entire Investigation Team from Worlds Federated to examine our intrusion into a domain that had not, after all, been abandoned by its occupants like a *Marie Celeste* but was simply lying fallow—with the owners in residence.

As Chavez, Dunlapil and I walked from my office toward the Comtower, I remember now that I felt a little foolish and very scared, like a child reluctant to report an accident to his parents but positive he had to risk upsetting them. The plastistele tower had never looked so out of place, so alien, so sacrilegious as it did now.

"Now, wait a minute, you two," Dunlapil protested. "You know what an Investigation Team means—"

"Anything and everything must be

done to mitigate our offense as soon as possible," Chavez said, interrupting nervously.

"Dammit." Dunlapil stopped in his tracks. "We've done nothing wrong."

"We may have crippled an entire generation." Chavez said with an expression of ineffable sorrow.

"There are plenty of fields we never touched. The aliens—natives—can use them for food—"

Chavez's smile deepened and he gently removed Dunlapil's hand from his arm. "'From dust ye came, to dust ye shall return, and from dust shall ye spring again.'"

It was then that Dunlapil understood the enormity of our crime.

"You mean, the plants are the people?"

"What else have I been trying to explain? They are born from the Trees."

WE DID what we could even as we waited for the specialists and the Investigation Team to arrive.

First we cleared the animals and crops from every one of the velvet fields. We removed every sign of our colonial occupation from the cities. The Team, composed of five non-human and three human species, arrived with menacing urgency well before the initial flood of xenospecialists. The Team members did not comment on the preliminary efforts to repair our error, nor did they protest their quarters in the

hastily erected dwellings on the bare, dusty plain and the subsequent roaring activity of the spaceport close by. All they did was observe with portentous intensity.

Of course, except for vacating the cities—and occupying them had been the least of our cumulative crimes—everything we did to remedy our trespass proved wrong in the final analysis. We would have been less destructive had we kept the cattle on the velvet fields and not slaughtered them for food. We ought to have let the crops ripen, die and return to the special soils that had nourished them. For the fields we stripped produced the worst horrors. But how were we to know?

Now, of course, we do know. We are burdened to this very day with guilt and remorse for the wholesale dismemberment and dispersal of those irretrievable beings: eaten, digested, defecated upon by grazers. And again, eaten, digested and eliminated by those who partook of the grazers' flesh. Of the countless disintegrated natives removed from their home soil by unwitting carriers, none can fruit on foreign soil. And on their own soil, to repeat, the fields we had stripped produced the worst horrors...

I remember when the last report had been turned in to the eight judges comprising the Investigation Team. Its members wasted no further time in formulating their decree. I was called to their quarters to hear the verdict. As I entered the room I

saw the judges seated on a raised platform, several feet above my head. That in itself was warning that we had lost all status in Worlds Federated.

A flick of the wrist attracted my attention to one of the three humans on the Team. Humbly I craned my head back but he refused to glance down at me.

"The investigation is complete," he said in an emotionless tone. "You have committed the worst act of genocide yet to be recorded in all galactic history."

"But sir—" My protest was cut off by a second peremptory gesture.

"Xenobiologists report that the growths in the velvet fields have reached the third stage in their evolution. The parallel between this life form in its second stage and that of the cellulose fauna of Brandon II is inescapable." Chavez had already told me of that parallel. "Now the plants resemble the exo-rhizomorphs of Planariae V and it is inevitable that this third stage will give way to the sentient life pictured in the murals of their cities.

"You came here as agrarians and agrarians you shall be, in the fields of those you have mutilated. What final reparations will be levied against you, one and all, cannot be known until the victims of your crimes pronounce the penance whereby you may redeem your species in the eyes of the galaxy."

He stopped speaking and waved me away. I withdrew to announce



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the verdict to my dazed fellow colonists.

I would far rather we had been summarily executed then and there, instead of being worn and torn apart by bits and pieces. But that was not the way of judgment for those who trespass in modern times.

We could not even make an appeal on the grounds that the planet had been released to us, for the Colony in its Charter took on all responsibility for its subsequent actions, having reaped benefits now so dearly to be paid for.

So we worked from that day until Budding Time late that hideous fall. We watched anxiously as the seedling

exo-rhizomorphs grew at a phenomenal rate until they were ten, then twenty, finally twenty-five feet high, thick-trunked, branching out, lush with green triangular foliage. By midsummer we knew why it was that during our time on Zobranoirundisi we had never been able to find any example of the Tree: such Trees grew once every hundred years. For they were the Trees of Life and bore the Fruit of Zobranoirundisi in the cellulose wombs, two to a branch, three to eleven branches per Tree. In the good fields—that is, the unviolated fields.

In the others...

THE GALAXY knows we tried to atone for our crime. Every man, woman and child devoted himself to tending the twisted, stunted, deformed, half-branched Trees that grew so piteously in those desecrated fields. Every one of us watched with growing apprehension and horror as each new day showed further evidence of the extent of our sacrilege. Oh, the hideous difference between those straight, tall Zobranoirundisi and—the Others. We were ready for any sacrifice as penance.

Then, the morning after the first good frost, when the cold had shriveled the stems, the first Zobranoirundisi tore through his vegetable placenta. He shook his tall willowy body, turned and made obeisance to his natal Tree of Life, ate of the soil at its roots, of its

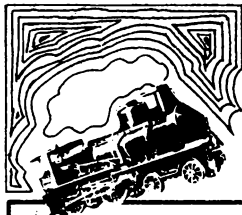
triangular foliage...and knew!

I can never retell the agony of that day when all those Zobranoirundisi faced us, their maimers, and announced the form our expiation would take. We bowed our heads to the inevitable, for we knew the sentence to be just and of Hammurabian simplicity.

We had to give back to the soil what we had taken from it. The handless Zobranoirundisi, recognizing his missing member from the cells now incorporated into the fingers of a young colony child nurtured on milk from cattle fed in the velvet fields, had every right to reclaim what was undeniably his own flesh. The legless Zobranoirundisi could not be condemned to a crippled existence when the Terran child has used the same cells to run freely for seven years on land where previously only Zobranoirundisi had trod.

We rendered, all of us, unto the Zobranoirundisi that which was truly theirs—seed and soil of the velvet fields, part and particle of the original fertilizing dust that would have been reconstituted during the cycle we had so impiously interrupted.

Nor were we permitted to evade the least segment of required reparation, for all mankind watched us. I will say this of us proudly, though I no longer have a tongue: mankind will be able to live with its conscience. Not one of us, when required, failed to give his flesh to the Zobranoirundisi in atonement. ●



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INHERITANCE

ROBERT WELLS

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

When the Superom moved inward from their origin in the Outer Vortices of the galaxy they sought planets like their own for habitation. As their skill and knowledge developed they sought to reclaim otherwise inhospitable planets. Thetis was one of these: for its sun was burning out, and in the three-thousandth age of their appearance in the Fourth Vortex the Superom had developed



the artificial sun. A sun was erected; the planet was made ready for humanity.

Six hundred years before the present an incurable plague swept through the Inner Vortices—a plague that attacked only Superom and none of the lesser breeds of humanity. Unreasoning fear and the urge of all Superom to return to the origins of the race forced the Galactic Council to order a total retreat from the Third and Fourth Vortices, and the Superom left their fabulous civilizations behind.

Shortly before the retreat had been ordered, however, an exploratory force had left Thetis for the Fifth Vortex. By the time it returned the withdrawal was already complete. The marooned Superom journeyed to the Galactic City at Mandanar to see if it were still possible to follow. But any hopes they might have had were destroyed by the Thetans, who prevented them from leaving. The lesser human breeds felt that so long as Superom remained on Thetis, peace and prosperity would continue.

Now, after a series of dark ages of degeneration, only four descendants of the original Superom of Thetis remain. SHEVAN, a young female Superom, has discovered old talk-tapes indicating the imminent death of Thetis' artificial sun. She tries to convince her cousin, DELBET, of the significance of this. But the young giant Superom is dull-witted, cares for little besides machinery, hunting

and—in an innocent, childlike way—for his cousin.

SHEVAN wishes to take the GREAT KAREL—a Superom preserved in a casket for six centuries and hence a sacred symbol to most Thetans of their planet's former greatness—to Mandanar. There, she believes, the old secrets of the Superom are hidden.

But the tyrannical Superom Regent of Thetis, KEREN, stands in her way. Any return to the old ways would threaten KEREN's rule and the primacy of his seat of power, the city Spadox. Enlisting the aid of the Helangles, a nomadic tribe that travels on mechanized "steedes," he captures SHEVAN and DELBET. SHEVAN is then locked up in the Tower with the GREAT KAREL's casket, and DELBET returns to his beloved machinery in the mines.

SHEVAN persuades SHADE, a wraith haunting the Tower, to bring DELBET to her. She tells the giant her plan: he is to send an apparently authenticated Superom message to all the tribes of Thetis—Helangles, Conducs, Saivainte and Agorans—announcing the Awakening of KAREL.

As the tribes arrive SHEVAN steals from the Tower through an underground tunnel to talk to the returning DELBET. So that KEREN will not suspect the source of the fake message, she takes DELBET back to the Tower with her but, on the way there, she is sexually attacked by the Helangle dwarf ARC-

WELD. DELBET pounces on ARCWELD and foils the assault, thereby incurring his intense hatred.

The Day of the Awakening arrives. DELBET, who in hunting has developed the ability to project his voice, puts words into the mouth of the still-frozen KAREL. KAREL is heard to tell the assembled multitude that he must be taken to Mandanar.

KEREN is in a fury. He hears of ARCWELD's frustrated adventure and seeks him out. ARCWELD, hungry for revenge on the giant and for power over the Regent, agrees to help KEREN stop SHEVAN, DELBET, and the Mandanar expedition that has just been mounted. To maintain contact KEREN gives the Helangle a black communicator box.

ARCWELD, sent by the leader of his tribe to scout a path for the expedition, stops near a stone jungle—in actuality a ruined city—to contact KEREN. There he is captured by the Submetropols, a strange breed of humans that has lived underground since the time of the Superom. But the strange black box, which apparently has the Superom Regent trapped inside, awes them. They attribute supernatural powers to ARCWELD and he finds himself in a position to command them to do his bidding.

Thus, when the expedition passes through a tunnel, at a prearranged moment the Submets come out of hiding, disrupt the caravan and capture SHEVAN. DELBET, however, escapes.

But DELBET, as well as ZEDWARD, an old Saivainte scholar, remember that the Submets at one time had an enemy, the witawu, which were attracted by short-wave radiation. The North Shore Conducs have domesticated the witawu. The members of the expedition decide to dispatch a task force to contact these Conducs and obtain witawu. The intention is to use them as a weapon against the Submets in order to rescue SHEVAN.

The swift task force includes both DELBET and ARCWELD . . .

IX

THE white guidelines of the road spun back endlessly under their wheels in the night. The task force rumbled along the main highway toward the stone jungle of Port West, then, after three hours, swerved north on the lateral toward the northwestern shore of the West Water.

The headlights of Arcweld's and Cleavewind's steeds drilled cylindrical hollows in the darkness. The swiftest Conduc auto had been commandeered for the task force—it carried Delbet, Mutch and the Caxitine Conduc Homan, Aplan's son. Pinned between the auto's precise medians of light in the Thetan night, the rest of the task force seemed like a space-vehicle threading the gulf between galaxies.

The dwarf and his younger Helangle companion alternated in lead-

ing the way. When it was his turn to lead, Arcweld let his stunted imagination grope as far forward as it could. He made tens of plans but either forgot or discarded most of them. When he was at the rear he rode close enough to the Conduc auto for his lamp beam to pick up Delbet's erect head and shoulders in the cab.

The dwarf crouched low over his steering bar, head thrust forward on its squat neck. Behind the visor his eyes paid only half attention to the road. The rest of the time they stared at the giant's skull as though Arcweld's hate were a flame that could burn through bone.

Delbet showed no sign of sensing the dwarf's enmity. The giant hardly spoke. He stared ahead into the tip of the leading cone of light, willing each new contour in the road to surrender their destination to them.

When he did speak it was only to deny two agitated appeals from Cleavewind for a halt. At last Homan, who was driving the Conduc auto, did force a halt. The auto's cruze fuel was overheating and the engine might collapse if they did not stop. Reluctantly the giant capitulated to Homan's warning.

It was nearing dawn as they pulled off the highway. Cleavewind was asleep as soon as he had stretched out beside his steede. Delbet and the Agoran Mutch slept leaning against one another in the auto.

While Homan opened the recharge vents on the power unit of the engine Arcweld, sleepless and burning with

urgency, swept his bike around. He watched the Conduc driver for a moment. Without raising his visor, he grunted, "Gonna move on up the next ridge. Scout it. Dig?"

Conduc and Helangle rarely had much to say to one another. Homan nodded briefly and turned back to his work.

The dwarf gunned his engine and roared away, confident the noise would not wake the rest of the exhausted party. Opportunity had presented itself. It was time to suffer the screaming and scolding.

He went a long way down the highway, then swung off the road and bumped cross-country.

In the reddish-gray light of Thetan daybreak, several hundred meters from the road he found an old quarry. There, he was certain, no one could see him from the road. He rocked his steede up on its forkrests and flung off his gauntlets. Muttering agitatedly under his breath, he fumbled the pannier straps free.

His hands shook as he set the controls on the box. Although it was so early in the morning, not more than five seconds passed before the enraged face of Keren swam to the surface of the screen.

Operating the box always disturbed the dwarf. The impression of Keren's physical presence it created challenged the senses. He backed into the deeper shadows of dawn, into a scar in the rock face. He felt less visible and less vulnerable there.

He said nothing, but Keren had

been waiting ten hours for a summons. He had already guessed the worst.

He was still trapped at Spadrox, a virtual hostage of the Thetans since the episode in the Tower and the departure of Karel's casket. He had waited sleeplessly by the transceiver for the call which would force his subjects to free him—the call which would mean that the casket and Shevan were again in his power and Thetis under his control.

If his rage had been cold it would have frightened the dwarf, but Arcweld understood violence. The Helangle laws were violent and he was used to living by them. After a moment or two of misgiving the dwarf began to relish the power he had over this superior creature. He squatted in his dark rock cleft and let Keren rave. He gnawed his fingers and grin-snarled and enjoyed the Superom's impotence.

At last Keren needed to have his fears confirmed. His ranting calmed. Then the dwarf, with studied insolence, related what had happened in the tunnel and afterward.

He was careful to place the blame on the inferior Submets. Their failure to secure Delbet had forced the dwarf to make a change of plan.

"Change of plan!" shouted Keren in renewed fury. "What change? Must I rely on a beat-up insect brain to plan for me, Keren of Thetis?"

"If not my beat-up brain—whose?" Deliberately the dwarf had discarded the deferential form when

addressing Keren. He squatted so that his face, half blanked by the visor, was thrust into the screen. "Okay. Yawl hit the road yawself. Burn dust! I'll pitch the box into the quarry if yawl don't need me!"

Arcweld could not understand all the barbed words the Superom flung at him in response.

When Keren had run dry again the dwarf said, "Yawl asked me about a change of plan. Yawl still wanta hear it? I don't have much time. I got to get back to the truck. Light's rising. I'm supposed to be taking a look at the road."

Keren's eyes blazed but he kept his temper.

"It had better work, dwarf. You can't afford to fail a second time. Tell me. I will judge it."

"Who failed?" The Superom's carefully worded jibe had stung the Helangle. "Yawl planned the ambush, didn't yawl? But not you that failed—not me. It was those camp troglos. Couldn't hold the giant. I think, too. Dig? I think like Superom—"

"Careful, dwarf."

"Yawl wanta hear my scheme or not?"

"Speak," said Keren, his voice choked with suppressed anger.

Arcweld spoke.

TWO or three times the young Helange, Cleavewind, seemed uncertain which route was best. This though he was supposed to have the mindmap of the zone and, in any

case, all his tribe learned as children to navigate by the movement and position of the sun.

It was Mutch who really had the mindmap.

In his youth Mutch had several times accompanied merchantile caravans of his people to the remote Conduc colonies of the North Shore. With the pleasurable clarity of youth recollected in middle age he recognized paths and landscapes—the look of a particular range of hills against the sky—the appearance of ruined stone jungle that seemed pegged to the plain by cores of stone when looked at from the ridge.

Arcweld observed Mutch's gift carefully.

At midday the party met the first colony of Conducs of the Western Shore. Homan spoke to them. They had heard about the Awakening and had recently consulted with several tribal groups already assembling outside Port West to see the expedition and the casket pass.

Delbet chose to remain out of sight. He impressed on Homan that the ambush and the kidnaping must be kept secret.

The Caxitine chief's son promptly invented a plausible story to explain the presence of the strange group of travelers. The Conducs were not surprised that the Superom wanted to get hold of some witawu elixir. Plenty of stories were told on the Western Shore about its scarcity and fragrant taste. It was rare and expensive, a proper food for gods.

The Conduc leader said they had heard that the North Shore tribes were starting to move toward their longnight camps in the south. He believed Harvest was a good time for buying the elixir. It was at its best then.

Homan climbed the ridge again to rejoin the task force. He was visibly pleased with himself.

From the spine of the ridge they could see the sunlight firing occasional silver arrows off the swell of the West Water which lay like a green-blue stone in the distance.

Delbet was anxious to be off. "Do we follow the road along this ridge?"

Cleavewind stared at the West Water, glanced at the sun. "While we got the water there on our right hand, okay. Yawl check, Arcweld?"

The dwarf was watching Mutch, who was standing on the cab of the auto. His thumbs were tucked into his belt. He was staring cross-country, inland from the ridge.

"The road bends to follow the shore of West Water," Mutch said. "I reckon if we was to take a rough kind of way down there and through this old tract of foodland we could save hours of traveling. We'd bisect the West Water circuit road and come back on where it turns northwest toward the mountains."

Mutch laughed and smoothed his shiny head with one hand.

"I remember—just a boy, I was—we'd been caught out on a plain like that in a rainstorm. One caravan time. Zut! How it rained!" He smiled

again, sweeping the past across the sky with a wave of his hand.

Arcweld watched him thoughtfully from behind his visor.

Delbet spoke. "Good, Mutch. We'll take your way." The giant was ready to start. "You sit next to Homan and guide him. The Helangles may get the worst of this ride. A few saved hours may make the difference between getting Great Karel and Shevan back alive and . . . and . . ." The thought of the alternative obviously was too much for him. He gestured urgently and climbed into the auto.

Cleavewind accepted the situation. He made the Thetan obeisance to Superom: palms flat against helmet.

Surly astride his steede, Arcweld still watched. Mutch's route suited him well enough but he must not show it. What he did not understand was the way the giant treated him. Surely Delbet had recognized him from their previous encounters. Only a day and a half ago Delbet had fled from the dwarf in the dawn on the hillside above the camp as though pursued by demons. There was no trace of that panic now.

Arcweld's mind flicked from possibility to possibility. Maybe, after all, it had had nothing to do with identity or recognition but had somehow been related to what Delbet was doing there.

But hunting talue? The dwarf chewed his lip reflectively. Why the hell feel guilty about hunting talue? He tried to recall each moment of

the encounter. Although his crude imagination relived it again and again as the caravan moved on, he failed to detect any new clues.

The plain looked flat and easy from the spine of the ridge. When they got down to it and began to cross they found malice under its bland surface.

The vegetation was short enough. The main strains of Thetan grass rarely grew above twenty centimeters. But they masked ridges and grooves where long ago the plain had been irrigated for a high-moisture crop. They shook the guts out of vehicles and riders. After four hours of bucking and bounding, Homan again had to insist on a halt.

Arcweld had not slept now for most of two days. His knotty limbs ached from controlling the bucking of his steede. His thighs were sore from bracing against the shocks quaking the machine. Still the chemicals leeching into his nervous system kept him awake.

He sat by his bike on the ground, sore and panting. The sun, slipping down the sky, was starting to fade. He watched the patient Homan opening the vents on the motor again. Faintly acrid, the smell of warm cruze drifted on the air.

The dwarf knew how quickly the fuel weakened if under constant stress. He let his mind turn this over. His developing ambition for power over Keren would be enhanced if he could strand the giant here in the wilderness. He worked with the blunt

tools of his imagination to picture how it might be brought about. The group was so small that outright treachery would reveal his hand completely, he realized.

He snarled with frustration. Mutch caught his attention. He was talking to Cleavewind. The Agoran was waving his short arms about as usual. He seemed to be doing a lot of pointing in the direction of the distant tail-down of the ridge. Cleavewind was shaking his head dubiously. He, too, was obviously feeling the fatigue of the journey.

Arcweld shut down external stimuli and briefly looked inward at his own mindmap. It was blurred and hazy, too dim to see what Mutch might be getting enthusiastic about. He switched back to watching Mutch just in time to catch a half-appealing look from Cleavewind.

The dwarf's mind flicked suddenly and he got a picture. Another followed it and another. He felt a blush of vanity. Yes, he, a Helange, thought like Superom.

He forced his sore arms to lever his body up and his aching legs to carry him half-limping, half-lopog to the conferring pair.

HIS determination was worth the pain it cost him as he had guessed it would be. He made his brain flick back over the series of pictures he had just seen. He wanted to be sure they were still there.

He ground his teeth and snarled to conceal the aches racking his body.

The look on Cleavewind's face wavered between relief and unease.

"Hi," said the dwarf. He waited. He had invited himself to join the conversation, but he did not mean to contribute.

Mutch smiled his expansive smile and continued with what he had been saying to Cleavewind.

"Sure, I'm right. I reckon it's about there, if it still exists. Now, why don't we take a look—"

"Trader says he digs this place," said Cleavewind apologetically to Arcweld. "Says the Conducs we're looking for might have a pad down 'long the shore. Far side of that ridge. Reckons we ought to search around while we're stopped. Save beatin' farther north."

"I just got a feeling in my belly," said Mutch conversationally. "Don't ask me where it comes from, but I just got it. I reckon they was around here last time I came up on a caravan. But that feeling tells me—I can't just pin it all down—that it was right there that something went wrong . . ."

The dwarf watched, wrinkled fingers kneading away at his aching groin.

"My belly's a pretty good guide, too. It ain't often wrong."

"The storm," suggested Cleavewind disinterestedly. "You told us 'bout that before. Check?"

Mutch shook his head.

The young Helange repeated, "He thinks we oughta search while we're pulled up." He wanted Arcweld to

take over the situation, and the decision.

The dwarf looked painfully at the sky and the mountains. Even his neck ached. He noticed that the mountains seemed appreciably nearer in the waning sunlight.

"He's a smart fellow," Arcweld said. He said it as if Mutch were not there. "The last time he did what his gut told him, we got into this ass-aching grassland. Sooner we make a road again, I dig it fine."

"You roadsters always did complain about shortcuts," Mutch bantered, but sounding vaguely defensive. "Off your machines and roads you got no stamina. Now, when I was a boy—"

"Cradpats," blurted Arcweld rudely. "If it's gonna save my balls from bouncing another three hours, I'll ride yawl to the ridge and we'll take a look. But I thought yawl said this Conduc lot padded on the North Shore by the peaks."

"Quite right, my sawn-off friend. But as you heard Homan say after he met that last bunch, our Conduc brothers tend to move off the North Shore at this time in Harvest. Like the rest of us, they don't care to sit in mud and cold. And there's plenty of that comes down off the mountains during the longnight." Mutch laughed. "No, sir. They wrap up their swarms of witawu and hike down to this shore where it don't freeze and they can keep their tails dry. Then they've got the elixir just garnered to trade and all the little old

witawu in nice drowsy hives. It's all fine and cozy-like. Except anything less cozy than a witawu swarm disturbed in hibernation I personally wouldn't care to imagine."

The dwarf kneaded away at his groin, pinching, jerking. He tried to switch back to the pictures but the Agoran's own vivid images were too unsettling.

"He wanted me to lift him up there." Cleavewind lay back on the turf, giving in to exhaustion. He drew up his withered legs so that he looked like a cross between an insect larva and a human fetus. "I'm used up. I'm so balled-up tired my mind-map's blanked. I just can't take him." He yawned.

"I'll lift yawl," Arcweld said. "Hell, another hour on this ass-aching pitch and I quit. I just hope your gut's not too reliable and we don't hit your trouble. What kind of trouble?"

"I can't recall." Mutch shook his head and looked over at the tail-down of the ridge, trying to recapture the faded memory. He stuck his thumbs into his belt and pushed out his lower lip with his tongue.

"Let's go," said Arcweld.

It looked to be less than five hundred meters to the tail-down of the ridge. But the falling sun had brought a slight haze with it and distances had become deceptive. By the time Arcweld had the steede crisscrossing up the slope they had covered more than a kilometer and Mutch was shaken speechless.

Fortunately the impact of the view from the ridge top rendered speech superfluous. They saw that the old highway did run up there. Mutch dismounted stiffly from behind the dwarf. Arcweld levered his steede up onto its rest, then shoved up his helmet visor to get a better view of the broad scene.

Peering out from below jutting brows, he cursed. He was half-blinded by the light—they were facing the sun. He shoved sweat and pain away from his face with an impatient gesture. His eyes focused, and his big jaws snapped shut in surprise. The mindmap flowed once across his consciousness with harsh clarity. Then it was gone again. Instinct had jolted his shallow memory before and it had been right.

The West Water was close. It stretched away west and south as far as he could see. Northwest and north, the mountains cupped a silver breast of it in black hands.

The sun had perhaps an hour until setting but was already a red globe in the mist. Under the overhang of the mountains, stretches of water were already night.

After the relentless green ridges of the plain, the variations before them were startlingly colorful. But that was not what had brought Arcweld's teeth together in surprise and triumph.

IMMEDIATELY below them, at the foot of the volcanic shale

where water erosion had laid open the ridge, were visible a host of scarlet blooms. They were lantern-shaped and fist-sized and rested on the hairy stalks of a plant with brilliant yellow foliage.

This great canopy of color covered the whole of the foreshore from the foot of the ridge to a distance of two to three hundred meters into the ocean. Here and there the scarlet-and-yellow spread was broken by the protrusion of an egg-shaped dome.

Out of the corner of his eye Arcweld glimpsed Mutch staring, mouth open in an astonished O as he looked down on the shimmering mantle.

The Agoran flung out one of his extravagant gestures. "You see!" he breathed. He did not require an audience to applaud the accuracy of his intuition. The gesture looked as if it were intended for the attentive host of blossoms below him rather than for the dwarf.

In reflex response to the eccentricity of the scene, Mutch began to descend as if hypnotized toward the frozen kaleidoscope of color. Arcweld's gesture of restraint was also reflex. Quickly he curtailed it. The absorbed Agoran saw neither it nor the dwarf's quick smothering of it.

Arcweld slammed shut his visor; his heart was racing. He hopped up, crouching on the ridge's spine, his neck and helmeted head thrust forward. His aching arms felt a tingle spread upward from the fingers, as though the ground were sending him

messages. Lips drawn apart as far as they would stretch, saliva gathering at their corners, he watched Mutch's descent.

So far the Agoran had not looked back. His ecstatic cries floated up to the dwarf, some of them chopped by the effort of descent.

"—Told you so—beriflame—long-night quarters—look at it! Perfect example—now I've got it—"

Arms spread suddenly like the wings of a wheeling bird, Mutch checked himself. He had started to slip on the loose shale.

As though both men were controlled by strings of the same puppet master, Arcweld simultaneously jerked out of immobility. He crab-scuttled sidewise, then backward, eyes fixed on the Agoran. The dwarf reached one long ape-arm behind him.

Arcweld's hand found the steering bar on his steede. He levered himself with arm-power alone, then sprang acrobatically. His eyes were still on Mutch.

Mutch was sliding downward on the unstable shale. He was having difficulty keeping his balance. The Agoran's face was contorted by dismay. His cries had ceased. Could he stay on his feet?

Arcweld kicked down his steede, stamping the motor into life. He held the throttle open.

Mutch's short arms groped desperately at the shale face for a handhold. He still had not made a sound.

For a moment the whole scene was poised. Then with perfect control the dwarf shattered it. Throttle wide, gears and retroactors pitted against one another, he let the steede plunge forward. At that velocity and so shackled, the bike's nosewheel dug and flung the ground into a fountain less than a meter from the lip of the ridge.

The picture in his mind had sprung into place. The flame berries. The dangerous spots where they thrived. The warning of the scarlet lantern-fists.

Above Mutch the ridge crumbled. Lumps of shale slid away and stormed down. One of them, obedient to the malign being that had dispatched it, struck the trader in the chest.

Birdlike again, arms flapping, his round body plunged. At the bottom he cried out once and almost scrambled free of the sticky black swamp which nourished the beriflame. But the morass held him greedily.

He continued to struggle with his mouth wildly open. The mechanical silhouette of a man above held open the steede's alarm siren, drowning Mutch's cries as the swamp drowned Mutch.

It was swiftly over. The last thing to disappear into the throbbing carpet of scarlet and yellow was the Agoran's bald head. It parodied the domes of the witawu's empty winter hives, eggs in the silent flames.

Arcweld dismounted drunkenly. His hand remained on the siren. He

labored backward, dragging the steede with him, keeping the siren howling.

Homicide was unforgivable. "Not guilty!" cried the dwarf. The siren drowned his denial. "Not guilty! Not guilty!"

Out on the plain they had heard the blood-chilling omen. Now, in the distance, they saw the dwarf, hunched and twisted against the last of the sun—waving, crookedly alone, his mouth open on a soundless plea

MUTCH was gone. Delbet and Homan the Caxitine stood staring down on the carpet of flameberries. Just below where they stood was a tumble of volcanic shale and level with it a discontinuity in the plantation. Broken leaves and crushed stalks marked the spot where the Agoran had disappeared.

Arcweld looked at the mountains. In the gathering dark they seemed to have hunched closer together, grown threatening, accusing.

Cleavewind had dismounted from his steede. He was crouched by Delbet and Homan, but he was not looking at Mutch's grave. He was looking at his tribesman.

"I didn't remember. I was blown. My mindmap blanked on me. If he'd just waited, kept his cool. I could have told him—"

Delbet was still staring at the tide of beriflame that concealed the deadly swamp.

"I couldn't stop him. He flew.

Like a bird. How could I stop him?"

"Down there," said Homan. "The domes out there are witawu hives." He was addressing Delbet.

"He saw them." Arcweld shrilled. "That's what did it. He sailed down there like a bird."

"Witawu—here?" Delbet was baffled.

"Longnight quarters." Homan looked away toward the mountains. As the sun guttered out in the mist-shrouded face of the water, night advanced across the plain. Soon it would be dark enough for the primeval Thetan sun to emerge like a purple ghost from its grave in the night sky. "The tribes won't have moved down from the mountains yet with the amber fog and the elixir. We have a long way to go to meet them."

"At least we got it now," said Cleavewind. "We got the trail. The one they follow down from the mountains every longnight. It beats along this shore. We just follow it. Dig?"

The dwarf hawked and spat. Maybe the death of Mutch had come too late. He flared his nostrils to see whether he could catch a whiff of overheated cruze from Homan's auto. Pictures flicked over steadily in his mind.

He stood motionless for almost a minute, grinning and snarling silently at the distant sky, before he realized the giant was watching him. Delbet had wrenched his attention away from the flameberries and the wita-

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wu hives and was looking at Arcweld as if he could penetrate the dwarf's skull and see the pictures turning there.

Arcweld shuddered suddenly. His bladder was distended and painful. He shambled away. He looked for a concealing rock and urinated against it. There had been something in the giant's expression—something like recognition. Arcweld did not know what it meant. His brain was not equipped to analyze and forecast. He felt his hatred bubble, he felt dread of the giant's power, he felt the insistent surge toward the new things he coveted. But he would have been unable to express any of these emotions in such terms. Only through instinct illuminated by the tormenting pictures did he understand why his teeth bit into his raw lip, why the hair on his scalp bristled, why the chemicals pouring into his blood had kept him erect and sleepless hour after hour.

The dark came upon them quickly and with it exhaustion. Even Delbet, who showed signs of relentlessly denying everyone another night's sleep, had to submit. He still had the Saivainte cloak he had worn during his exile in the mountains. He wrapped himself in it and was soon asleep, squeezed uncomfortably across the pilot seat in the auto.

Homan lit a fire-ore torch to keep the darkness pressed back from the camp's perimeter. He sat awhile, his back against the auto, until he too sank into sleep.

Cleavewind twitched and snored and fought the frightful goblins freed by his dreams.

For a time Arcweld remained rampant and wakeful, staring into the well of the sky, listening to the silence broken now and then by the sleep sounds of his companions. "Arnalda!" moaned Cleavewind, briefly desiring some dream tentmate. Homan's eyelids fluttered. He turned and sighed. He lay on his back smiling sightlessly at the infinitely slow constellations of his ancestry turning in the sky. Delbet's hands twitched as he hunted talue and called Shevan to come and play.

The pictures in Arcweld's head began to slow and fade. They stumbled, intertwined, became confused. He slept.

Only the fire-ore torch stayed watchfully awake. Its light did not reach the trembling carpet of beriflame under which Mutch slept more soundly than any of his former companions on the ridge above.

X

FROM THE scarlet host of lanterns rose the domes of many moons. Slowly they waxed and turned. The genial face of Mutch wearing a mask of melancholy turned its eyes to watch the dwarf from every one of them.

Arcweld's hands felt swollen and unusable as he struggled with the vent covers on the Conduc auto. A constellation of stars peeled them-

selves from its side. Each one burned like a red-hot spark as it lodged between his fingers.

He wanted to cry out but knew that would wake the others.

Painfully he jammed each of the vent covers. The big eyes of moons watched him from their scarlet grave.

There was only one cover remaining but each time he jammed it, it sprang open. With a moan he realized that sunk deep within it and trying to swim to the surface was a face.

He thrust down the cover again. He held it over the persistent face. There was an ominous sound in the sky. With a force of a volcano the vent cover spurted into the air. Stars burned his hands again. The auto was gone. In its place, beckoning to the threatening sign in the sky, was the black box from his pannier.

Keren's face still struggled to escape from its depths but the sound was whirling down from the sky, twisting like the core of a cyclone. The Superom's mouth opened in a final shriek of hate and fury as the sound in the sky coagulated and funneled into the box.

The dwarf fled from the Regent's baleful glare only to find the reproach of the dead Agoran cutting off his flight.

Arcweld fell to his knees. Ten of Mutch shook their choked heads. Too close behind him, the sound had absorbed the box and now pursued him. A flint of rich, furred amber swayed, poised above him, spiraled

down, a menacing throb. He tried to scream but was drowned out by a sirenlike wail. It was throttling him. He tried to open his mouth. He could not move.

He fought himself awake and immediately writhed into a frozen gesture of terror. Within thirty centimeters of his eyes were Delbet's. The giant's hand was over his mouth.

The dwarf prepared to die. Above him the stars were already fading. The muscles of his cheeks and jaw made the plea: "Not guilty!"

"Keep quiet. Don't move," said the giant. The commands were superfluous. Arcweld could neither speak nor move in that grip.

"I know you." Delbet was so close the dwarf could feel the breath from the giant's nostrils. "You are mistaken to hold on to that grudge against me. When I struck you on the hillside above Spadox I saved you from death. You were not to blame! How were you to know it was a Superom girl wrapped in that Conduc caftan? But you would surely have died if you had harmed the girl. You know that, don't you?"

Arcweld's eyes rolled from side to side. Why had the Superom giant crept to him in the dawn to tell him this? Pinned down, he could not see where any of the others were. He could not see his steede. He could not see whether the Superom had maybe broken into the pannier and exposed his secret.

The giant continued to whisper rapidly, as though trying to beat the

daybreak. "It was you on that other hill, too, wasn't it? I was hunting talue. You saw me. You saw what I could do—"

ARCWELD'S eyes stopped rolling. His taut body shuddered. The terrified images in his mind slowed. He clawed among them for the dawn of two days past. He did not understand. He had tried to before and had failed. Pictures of the tunnel and the ambush and the seething, clammy Submets clogged his brain.

"—why I did it," the giant whispered. "How it was. I had to do it. I had to. Shevvy's smart. She's clever. Playing—leastways I was playing, and she was searching around and mooning around and thinking around as usual. We found the old library. It had talk-tapes in it. You know what talk-tapes are, Helangle? She made me take them back to Spadox. Then she spent weeks and weeks looking at these funny little dots and lines and squiggles. Then she used to tell me things. Stories that came out of the tapes into her head. I said she was clever, didn't I?"

The dwarf lay still now, not even struggling in the giant's grip. He listened.

"History. History it was mostly. All about how Thetis' used to be. And one of the frightening things was—the sun was dying—eh?—sun dying, Arcweld! And when it went out—you, me, all of us—we'd all go with it—"

The giant's story continued in

hurried whispers. How Shevan's intuition had become an obsession. How she had made him rebuild Keren's disused aircar and run away from Spadox with her in the first ill-planned attempt to reach Mandanar.

"Shevan says there, right there in Mandanar, we'll find the old ones' secrets preserved for us, Shevvy says they wouldn't have gone and just abandoned us. She reckons that there in Galactic City we'll find the answers. You understand me, Helangle?"

Arcweld stared at him. He blinked once. It might have been interpreted as assent. Here was another Superom in his hands—in the hands of a Thetan! The dwarf felt an excitement that made his belly tense like a spring.

"So you see when Keren captured us he locked Shevvy up. I had to go along with her plans then. She said Keren wouldn't let us meet again. She said he was planning to do something bad to her. She had me make the messages and send them to the tribes."

Arcweld breathed the cool dawn air. It was sweet. It was aromatic. He breathed slowly. He was inhaling power itself.

Delbet hesitated. The dwarf waited too. His gathering intelligence, still half-animal, waited for the moment to pounce on the revelation he sensed was due.

"She said that only if Karel spoke—that would be the way to

break Keren's power. She knew that when I hunted talue I could put my voice in another place—"

The dwarf inhaled deeply. Now the Superom Regent could break the expedition. The giant was telling the Helangle everything he needed to know. All he had to do was transmit the information to Keren.

"I made the voice come from the casket. It wasn't Karel. It was me that spoke. Shevan said if I could do it for talue I could do it in the Tower. But I did it because we have to save Thetis. Then I saw that you knew. But we need your help, Helangle."

Arcweld breathed.

"You harbor the grudge. You wish to stop the expedition because of me. But now you know the true purpose. The one Keren won't let himself see."

Power. In. Out. Sweet, aromatic power.

"You will help. I need your experience and your mindmap to find the witawu and rescue Shevan and Great Karel. I, a Superom, demand your confidence and your ungrudging help."

Arcweld was confused. The simple giant, in his innocence, had recognized and yet had failed to recognize the dwarf's role.

Calmly he lifted a wrinkled paw to push Delbet's hand from his lips.

His voice croaked, "Superom are our masters. Now I dig. What you say checks. I'll go along."

A smile of relief wreathed the

giant's innocent face. He squeezed Arcweld's shoulder in one enormous paw. "So—we're allies."

The dwarf's lips parted in an enigmatic ape expression. Delbet nodded, smiling. Suddenly, with the swift animal grace he had acquired from hunting, he faded from the dwarf's side into the gathering light.

Arcweld's expression did not change. He turned his head fractionally to watch the giant go. Behind the grin-snarl he plunged his dripping hands into a gashed ribcage and drew forth an enemy's heart. He had the power at last—

Power he could not use yet because there was no time now to absent himself from the expedition. An hour after the sun appeared in the sky they were back on the highway that skirted the northwest shore of the West Water. Keren would be waiting and fuming at Spadrox, but there was no chance to contact him as the task force sped without pause first west, then northeast, the great black mountains marching steadily over the plain to meet them.

AS THE doomed sun stood overhead at noon the Conduc camp stitched itself to a ridge on the shore of the West Water.

The Conducs of the North Shore were grim and somber. Their dress, their wild eyes, the women's hair and the men's beards—all reflected something of the harsh crags under which

they lived for most of the year. Arcweld, who had traveled widely between the enclave at Spadox and the lower shores of the West Water, had never seen such a savage-looking crew.

The Conducs suffered a shock, too. In their homes under the shadow of the mountains they were cut off from contact with other Thetan tribes. Not within the living memory of any of them had a Superom crossed their territories. So far as they were concerned the old super-race of Thetis was no more than a legend. They knew little and cared less about the traditions born centuries before.

The appearance of the giant with his Superom eyes and black cap of hair, tall and forbidding as a North Shore crag when seen among his Thetan companions, proved too much for them. Even though they recognized Homan as one of their lowland brothers they shrank to the ground in fear. They bent like grass before the first longnight gales. It took Homan ten minutes of cajolery and persuasion to get the braver among them to listen to his strange and fearful history.

Only the Conduc leader's two older sons and one other man would consent to make contact. They sat down cross-legged in a council ring with Homan and the giant. They were scared and sullen. They kept their eyes fixed on the earth and their chins lowered to their chests. Thus their unkempt hair hung for-

ward about their cheeks and screened them from the terror of the giant's presence.

The rest of the tribe, including its old and frail leader, crept away to the shelter of their vehicles. From the windows the wild eyes of one or two of the bolder spirits would occasionally peep fearfully at the council group and the strangers whose coming had thrown awry the simple pattern of their lives.

The three Conduc nomads had not heard of the Awakening or the exodus from Spadox. Homan patiently explained it all.

They listened sullenly. Life on the North Shore made them wary of strangers. They muttered and glanced at one another and looked from time to time uneasily at the place just outside the camp where two of their tribe's sworn rivals squatted on a patch of dusty ground. To Conducs, the blank visors and insect-head helmets of the Helangles signified menace.

The stories Homan had to tell did nothing to relieve their minds. Clearly they were ill at ease. Yet out of their planet's past had stepped a legend. He had walked straight into their lives looking the way the laws said he must look, having the power and the authority to combine and lead a mixed group of Thetans. How could the Caxitine's stories be mere invention? How could there be any trick?

"So," said Homan, "we must use the amber fog to flush out the

troglodytes. They have become outcasts. They have committed treason. They have carried away the casket in which rests all hope for our planet's future and for the return of the Superom from the stars. In the underground Submets are masters. None of us could follow. But the amber fog will find them. It will drive them out with fear."

"Yes!" Delbet smashed his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "We shall drive out the Submets. We shall force them to give up Shevan and Great Karel. There's not much time. We must hurry back."

The North Shore Conduc flinched. Even now that Delbet had intervened in the council they would not look at him or speak to him.

The older of the two brothers said something in dialect to his companions.

Homan frowned. The three nomads looked glumly at one another.

"What do they say, Homan?" Delbet leaned down, his brow wrinkled with anxiety.

Homan shook his head.

With trembling lips the younger of the two brothers began to talk but faltered and stopped.

Once more the three North Shore people exchanged agonized looks. Finally the third man cleared his throat and said, "All the witawu are dormant, just settling for the long-night. They would not be of any use—"

"No!" Delbet exclaimed, striking his thigh in agitation. "It's better

that way! Mutch the Agoran said they were fiercer when they were roused out of the longnight sleep—"

The spokesman continued to address Homan, still not daring to acknowledge Delbet's presence. "We shall starve next year without the amber fog." He stared sullenly at his companions. They scowled encouragement. "There are no wild witawu left. If we lost our hives we could not breed them. We would have no elixir to trade to the caravans."

"Listen to me," said Homan angrily. "Does your tribe, too, wish to suffer as the Submets of Westward City Three will suffer for their treachery? What would you do if we had brought our master Delbet Sir here into your camp wounded? Would you have dared refuse a Superom doctoring? Would you have refused him something to bind his wounds in order to save him from death?"

The shrewdness of this appeal sank a barb of a different kind into Delbet's unsophisticated imagination.

He writhed. It was as if the tribesmen had actually denied him succor and the situation Homan had hypothesized were at hand. He shot out one of his great hands. He, so gentle in all things, now in blind panic seemed about to break the spokesman's arm.

"You—refuse. How dare you—" he choked.

THE Conduc shrieked. Arcweld, observing from a short distance

away, jerked forward. Understanding violence, his whole body cocked for the snap of bone. He thought he heard the swishing scuttle as the watchers in the nomad autos dived sympathetically away from the wrathful Superom ready to maim their luckless colleague.

But Homan had grabbed his master's elbow in time.

"Wait, Delbet Sir! Wait!" He turned to the North Shore men. "You. Listen! Below ground in Westward City Three creatures have reverted to the primitive. They no longer acknowledge the power and greatness of the Superom. Perhaps they never knew it. They ambushed the caravan and they carried the Superom Shevan Lady and the casket of Great Karel into the underground.

"At the Awakening in Spadrox, Great Karel commanded us to carry him to Mandanar where the casket would be opened at last. He revealed that at Galactic City lie the secrets to revive and restore him—" Homan dropped his voice. "Will it be you, Conduc nomads of the North Shore, who prevent this by blocking rescue from the Submets?"

"Two hives will be enough," Delbet added urgently. "And they will be returned to you. If the amber fog is not recaptured after it has accomplished its mission, then I or my cousin Shevan will order your brother tribes of the North Shore to replace your losses from their resources."

The nomads hung their heads.

"Well?" queried Homan.

The one who had been on the brink of injury could not speak. His teeth were still rattling. The older brother undertook to reply. With crude diplomacy he mumbled, "What our masters command cannot be in question. We ask only that our living be remembered. Our people would starve without the amber fog. We shall speak to our father. He will order that hives of the amber fog be given to you. Come with us. We must honor you in our camp."

The dwarf had overheard the exchanges in council. Although unable to comprehend all, he understood enough. But no one would know that. The expression on his gnarled face was never easily readable.

He and Cleavewind were supposed to be guarding the auto while Delbet and Homan pow-wowed. The first thought in his mind as he saw the five men rise to move deeper into the camp was that he might seize the opportunity to report to Keren. He could communicate to the Regent the astonishing and damning information Delbet had given him that morning. He felt sure that if he did, by the time the task force got back to the stone jungle Keren would have descended upon it and so would be waiting to abort the expedition and reward him.

But he had a second thought. Now he could go to work on the auto to see whether he could rig the vents to bring it to a halt in some remote place.

The ceaseless pictures turned in the dwarf's mind. He saw the giant stranded. He saw himself racing back to the stone jungle, discarding the deadly hives of the witawu. He saw himself standing before the Regent and receiving his reward. He saw the hissing, cringing Submets deliver Shevan and the sea-emerald casket to him . . .

Suddenly in the afternoon sunlight a shiver ran down the dwarf's spine. The Submets had been promised reward and protection for the raid. All the Regent's threats and cunning had been required to screw them up to the point where they dared lay hands on Superom and the sacred relic: What fears might now be shrinking their limited intelligence as they cowered underground? They would know that the ambush had not achieved all that had been intended. Two days had passed without the promised arrival of the leader to whom they could relinquish their awesome captives. And all the while, in their dim world, no doubt the Superom girl-child had been harassing them with her eloquence.

Arcweld scratched and kneaded at his groin anxiously. If the pale troglos were browbeaten into revealing the authorship of the plot, an entirely different reception committee might be awaiting the return of the task force.

He turned his mind away from these nightmares. Delbet and Homan and the three nomads had moved far into the Conduc camp. Another

council was about to start. The group's old chief was helped from his auto. The Conducs had gained confidence and were beginning to leave their hiding places and gather around.

The two embers of thought which had glowed in the dwarf's mind were fanned into flame by the blast of fear he had just felt. Evidence of the trick that had removed the seat of power from Spadox must reach Keren. Armed with such evidence he could go immediately to Westward City Three. Equally, Del must be prevented from arriving before the Regent. The two thoughts were the legs of a single idea: he must act now. The dwarf preened himself. He, a Helangle, by marshaling thoughts and implementing ideas, was showing Superom powers.

ARCWELD looked at the autos of the North Shore people. The tracks of the battered vehicles had been adapted for the rough ground and mudflats of the northern lands. If he immobilized Homan's auto the giant would simply commandeer one of the nomads' trucks. Still, Arcweld felt confident that his steede would travel twice as fast as any of the beat-up transports he saw formed into the customary defensive ring around the camp. The only machine that could match his for speed was Cleavewind's.

The dwarf swiveled his head. He saw Cleavewind squatting behind the auto, facing the empty plain and a

silver arm of the West Water.

Cleavewind had long ago lost interest in the events at the camp. A stubby finger scratched meaningless patterns in a patch of dust between his feet.

“Hey, Cleave?”

“Huh?” The young Helangle lifted his face.

“That crazy giant’s gonna start right on back. Soon as he gets the amber fog, we’ll be burning ground again. You better go trade cruze with those Conduc. We gonna need it. Dig?”

The young one stared. Goggles hid his eyes, but the rest of his face was clearly sleepy. Obviously he had been lost in some daydream.

“Huh? You blown your mind? We got enough cruze for a week. Both of us. What do we need with cruze?”

“For that—” the dwarf jerked his head at Homan’s auto—“tickbrain! It burns cruze like grass. He’ll never make it back to the stone jungle if he don’t take fuel on board.”

“So let him worry about it. Does a Conduc worry about how a Helangle runs his steede? Nix!” Cleavewind still had not moved his body. It continued to face the plain and the distant sweep of water. He looked back at Arcweld over his shoulder.

“Go on down there and remind him,” Arcweld said. “Go tell him he’ll need to trade for cruze as well as amber fog. Go on. Before the council breaks up.”

Cleavewind hopped to his feet. “Why the hell don’t you go?”

“Because I give the orders, dig?” growled the dwarf menacingly. “Go ahead. Burn. No, goddamn it—not on that. You wanna start a rumble!”

Cleavewind had sullenly heaved his bike off its forkrest.

The dwarf and the young Helangle faced one another in silence. A few seconds passed. With helmets jammed on tight, goggles down and identical black jackets studded with designs they looked like huge antagonistic insects.

Cleavewind chewed his lip. Arcweld saw that the youngster might carry his defiance and his steede out of reach. That would destroy the plan. The dwarf’s heart pumped. He had to cajole or bully. The choice was clear. He was a Helangle.

He said with unpleasant calm, “Yawl ever been neuro-whipped, Cleave?”

Cleavewind’s cheek twitched.

“Listen,” said Arcweld. “Yawl listen, dugsucker. Me. Arcweld. I think like Superom. I talk to the stupid giant. He hears me when I talk. Yawl better start nodding when I give orders. Otherwise yawl gonna taste the neuro-whip when we get back.”

Neither Delbet nor Shevan toted one of the fearsome old weapons from Keren’s armory—but Cleavewind did not know that. With a snarl he shoved the bike back onto its rest. He went down the slope into the camp.

Arcweld watched him go. The dwarf’s lips parted over his blunt

teeth and his nostrils dilated to drag air into his lungs, cramped under the hammering of his heart.

There was little time. What he had to do must be done quickly. The council was less than two hundred meters away. He could see Delbet's head and shoulders clear above the crowd even though the giant was seated. He seemed to be talking with some urgency, gesturing occasionally. His hands molded the air into shapes of speech.

CLEAVEWIND had covered about half the distance between the edge of the camp and the conference. The dwarf, reaching behind him, felt the step of Homan's auto. He froze. He hoped that when Cleavewind reached the fringes of the listeners they would thereby be distracted and not notice anything strange going on at the auto.

Cleavewind looked back. Arcweld frowned angrily at him to continue on.

The young Helangle hesitated and then with a snarl jerked forward, skirting the group, looking for a way through to Homan and the giant.

One or two of the North Shore Conducs glanced at Cleavewind with distaste.

The dwarf turned quickly. He sprang the catches securing the hatch over the motor, then jerked out the wrench in the top of his boot. He slid the hatch to one side, hauled himself upright and with two or three savage

twists jammed shut the vents from the fuel cell. Sweat trickled down his nose under his goggles.

He would have to jam the vents on the other side as well. He craned forward, trying to see over the compact motor, but could not sight the other vents accurately enough.

Scowling and panting, he scuttled around the front of the vehicle. He paused to look into the camp. The group was still intact, the conference continuing.

With a kind of panicky fury the dwarf jammed the remaining vents.

Now that it was begun the plan had to be carried through. He was revealed, committed. Dropping into his ape-crouch, he sped around the blind side of the vehicle. His tongue felt dry and leathery though flecks of spittle gathered at the corners of his mouth.

Cleavewind's steede perched on its rests immediately behind the auto. He spun the nuts on the fuel-cell cover. The pungent smell of cruze stung his nostrils. Apart from homicide the most heinous crime among the Helangles was the theft or vandalizing of a steede. Arcweld suffered a moment of instinctive fear as the cover swung down. Then he jammed the wrench into the exposed cell, tumbling backward with fright and pain as a great white blister of cruze swelled from the gash, stinging his eyes and singeing his gauntlet.

He half rolled, half scrambled toward his own bike. Now only two things remained: flight and the hope

that he had frustrated effective pursuit.

The camp was stirring uneasily. Arcweld reached his steede and kicked it down onto its wheels. The smooth blue of the sky threw back the roar as his foot stabbed the motor into life. On the ground the cruze from the violated cell was a burning star.

He opened the throttle. The engine shrieked. There was no point in looking back—he had announced himself at last. But as he wrenched the bike around and the sky spun in sympathy he found that an image of the camp froze into one stopped instant of time in his head.

A field of faces in fixed surprise. The faces had turned to him as the flowers of the plain turn to the sun. From among them glared the handsome Superom face of Delbet. He strode forward, at first indignantly, then with passionate urgency. The picture moved. The giant broke into a run. The sky whirled above the dwarf and now the road and the plain opened before him—leaves of a book wiped clean.

Arcweld flew.

THE Helangles rode in packs, scouted in parties. It was twenty years since Arcweld had ridden alone with any considerable journey before him, twenty years since he had traveled ritually into a stone jungle to serve the night of his manhood. Daybreak the next morning had found him flying. He flew now as he

had then, with the sky pouring back the sound of his steede. The same dream-demons pursued him: the fire and wrath of the unknown future and the impenetrable past.

He must stop and use the box to summon Keren out of Spadrox but he knew that first he must open a wide gulf between himself and pursuit. Otherwise he might be overtaken while making the call.

He feared the route by the West Water along the ridge where Mutch had died. On the other hand the harsh ridged plain might delay him. Worse, it might damage his steede. He held to the road.

The sun was descending. Behind him the horizon had swallowed the last view of the North Shore Conduc camp. The sweep of the old highway was as empty as the surface of the West Water itself. The dwarf flew, crouched like a jockey. The wind tore at his helmet. His teeth were bared and the vibrating motor like a part of him.

As he sped down an incline and catapulted up the other side he recognized the field of beriflame across the bay. His heart slurred. "Not guilty!" Even as he mumbled the words his hands closed spasmodically on the retroactors.

The steede slewed halfway across the highway with a screech and a whinny. The motor stalled.

The dwarf teetered crazily but stuck to the saddle. He sat snarling and yickering like a beast, as though the old demons of his youth had

vaulted twenty years and blockaded the road ahead.

Above the scarlet field and the gleaming witawu hives, a number of halted vehicles were strung along the ridge. Even at this distance they were identifiable as those of Conduc nomads.

The punished motor of his steede, restarted, was whimpering only a little louder than the dwarf. Again it stalled. But his panic had cooled enough for him to realize that the camp ahead was part of the annual migration from the north. This group must have come in across the plain during the morning. Delbet's party had missed a meeting with them by a few hours. Arcweld looked back at last. Empty road, empty plain.

The camp had caught the sound of his approach through the vast loneliness. One or two of the shaggy nomads were standing in the road; others had climbed onto their autos. Movement in the field drew Arcweld's attention to a pair of crude boats floating among the flameberries between the hives. Their Conduc crews stood up to look. The boats were full of gently pulsing things that looked like giant sponges.

The grave, bearded nomads stared at the distant apparition. They looked at one another. A Helangle—alone?

ARCWELD SPAT. With his withered leg as a crank he thrust the motor into life again, opened the drive and retroactors together. The

steede leaped forward over the highway like a hunting tree-tiger, landed on the embankment, hurtled down the far side and into the plain.

The dwarf intended to describe a loop around the camp and rejoin the highway further south. But having made some two kilometers he caught sight of a ruined escarpment and the dry canals of one of the old irrigation reservoirs. He sent the bike bouncing into one of the dust-filled ducts, drove a little way on and stopped. The trench seemed deep enough to hide him from anyone on the ridge highway.

He looked around. The silence was enormous after the din of the motor. Yes, he was out of sight from the ridge. This was a better place than most for making his call to Keren.

He threw off his gauntlets, swung stiffly from the saddle of his steede. Opening the pannier, he set the box on the ground. Crouching, with thick fingers he did what Keren had taught him to do to the knobs and switches.

He waited. His breath was the noisiest thing in the great silence. Sweat running from under his helmet and visor had streaked the dust on his face. The distorted reflection of a savage looked at him from the curve of the box's screen.

Now the screen began to fill with its own particular darkness. The dwarf waited, twisting his face nervously, shrugging, fidgeting while the box hummed. Still nothing swam to the surface of the pool at its center. The Regent was a long time answer-

ing the call. Arcweld spat into the dust. His right hand kneaded away at his groin, coaxing, comforting.

He pushed again the switch which summoned his master. He lifted his head, anxiously staring up at the sun. Keren might be eating but the pulsator on his wrist should alert him at any time. A tiny glacier of fear began to spread from the pit of the dwarf's stomach.

If something had happened to the Regent, Arcweld was alone. Alone. Even his breath no longer broke the silence. Alone he could not frustrate the expedition. Nor could he rejoin it.

In fear the dwarf struck the box. "Come! Keren! Yawl bearded cradpat Superom bastard. Come!"

A little dust rolled from the cracks in the stones of the dead canal. The hum seemed louder.

"Dwarf—" said the box. "Is it you? You, at last, you stunted, mis-conceived—"

"Keren Sir!" Arcweld added the respectful suffix in sheer relief. "I can't see you."

"I'm here, You've turned the box into the sun. Turn it with its back to the sun, you misshapen animal. Where have you been? What have you done?"

"Listen," the dwarf breathed. "Yawl listen good, Regent." His arrogance was returning. He hopped about with excitement. "Ain't much time. The Agoran got drowned. We got to a North Shore Conduc camp. I busted the Homan kid's auto and my

man's steede so they couldn't follow."

Keren's bearded face was visible at last. Its hollow eyes stared at the capering, twisted shadow he had made into an ally.

"I got all you need to bust the whole thing wide. After I killed—ah—after Mutch got drowned the dumb giant came to me one morning—"

The humming had gathered strength. There was more than the sound of two voices.

"He said—"

"Speak louder, dwarf. What's that whirring sound?"

It was gaining power with every second. Arcweld stopped. Clearly the source was not the box. It was the sky. The sky!

The dwarf stared at the turning blue bowl. All day it had followed him, watching him, empty, polished; now over the West Water behind him it had become blemished. It had grown three clumps of fungi that screwed great cone-shaped cavities in its inscrutable face. And there was no mistaking where they pointed.

Keren was shouting a word. In the instant of panic before he realized what the word was, Arcweld tried to remember where he had seen the purposeful fungi before. In a dream—a nightmare?

His shriek and Keren's angry cry came simultaneously.

"Witawu!"

"The amber fog!"

"The transceiver! Those things are attracted by radio short-wave. Switch

it off, you dolt!" howled the Regent.

But it was too late. The dwarf had gathered the precious magic box in his arms and was no longer listening.

IN loud cones the witawu sped over the plain. The first stimulus from the box had jabbed them out of the drowsy prelude to their longnight sleep. They terrified their keepers, spiraling from the hives and the boats as though Harvest had never come. A thousand generations had not blunted the deep instinct that the radio waves had triggered. The witawu flew unerringly inland, called by an echo from the past.

"Dwarf! They'll destroy you! Switch it off!"

Arcweld might have been deaf. Crazed by panic, he could not relinquish the magic the Superom had entrusted to him. While Keren screamed warning after warning, the dwarf fought to get the box into the pannier. Foam flecked his lips. He was beyond the reach of the Regent's voice or anything else.

Arcweld slammed shut his visor and sprang into the saddle. The first witawu swarm, buzzing expectantly, bored down through the radio waves flooding from the strange object below.

"Aahhg—" Striking at the hard bodies and invisible wings was useless. They swarmed over the dwarf. His gauntlets lay somewhere on the ground; a dozen white-hot needles sank into his unprotected hands. He could not see properly through the

mass of amber that had settled on his goggles and visor.

Wildly his leg cranked the steede alive. Thousands of witawu were flung momentarily into the air. They collided with the next swarm arriving. Thousands more clung to bike and rider. A great pendulous mass of winged bodies, like some obscene growth, fought to get into the pannier.

Their weight unbalanced the bike. It careened from side to side, striking the banks, sending down storms of dust as the dwarf tried to escape from the gully to the plain.

All the folk of the Conduc group except those still aboard their boats in the beriflame field climbed to the highway atop the ridge. They stared up at the sky and over the plateau, seeking an explanation for the flight of their witawu, and exchanging brittle cries of astonishment and disbelief. And there, dotted along the ridge like a theater audience, they watched the final act of the nightmare that had begun at dawn three days earlier on a hillside above Westward City Three.

In the still afternoon light the cloud of insects circled. They whirled and eddied, rose and fell, blew like wind-driven smoke.

At first it looked as though the swarms were consolidating to tow something along the ground. They swirled, expanded, massed, dived upon the earthbound object. They covered it with throbbing amber. It seemed as if they were trying to drag

it back as a prize to the Conduc camp.

Then one of the sharper nomads realized the witawu were not towing it—it was towing them.

He called out to a companion. The man nodded. They were remembering the solitary Helangle who had appeared mysteriously on the road twenty minutes ago. Now the approaching shape, clouded and distorted by the swarming insects, was becoming recognizably a Helangle steede and rider. Now, too, the sound of the motor was clear, although the frenzied din of the witawu challenged it. The infested bike and its pilot reeled crazily across the plain.

The dwarf dared not scream. The amber insects were everywhere and would not stop at exploring an open mouth. The dreams in Arcweld's mind had become molten and he could no longer control the pictures. But he kept his lips shut. Time after time he sought to raise one stung, swollen hand to brush the insects from his goggles and try to see where he was going.

In desperation he opened the throttle wide. The bike bucked and plunged. He had to lean this way and that to counter the crowding weight of witawu dragging the bike off balance. He was incapable of understanding that cutting the pannier free would rid him of the attackers, though every thread of instinct left to him was concentrated on his own survival.

The bike screamed forward, lurching from side to side. The amber fog thinned and scattered but quickly reformed. Hot-wire stings sank into the dwarf's hands, chin, neck.

The steede bounced high on the washboard surface of the plateau. Witawu swarmed about the Helangle, circling, settling, rising and swirling, buzzing furiously.

The people on the ridge watched woodenly, aware that they could not help even if they wanted to. They, better than any other Thetans, knew the unmanageable fury of the witawu swarms. Arcweld was beyond aid.

For half a minute they watched as the steede zigzagged toward them, sometimes airborne, sometimes earthbound. Then one Conduc shrieked and waved his arms. They scattered. Men and woman grabbed their children and dived for safety.

A swath of sparks flew into the air. One of its steering bars had sideswiped a rock as the bike had keeled over almost parallel to the ground. Somehow Arcweld righted it. The motor roared again. The bike dipped and then leaped up the ridge.

Thousands of witawu still clung to Helangle and steede. It struck the ridge top and bounced against one of the Conduc autos. Tiny but real stars showered from the constellation painted on the steede's side. The dwarf was flung forward but somehow held on as the bike touched the highway.

He could see nothing, hear nothing. He was totally covered now

by stinging, buzzing witawu. His every muscle and nerve were committed to blind flight.

Convulsively his right hand wrung the throttle. With a protesting howl the steede sprang forward. Its wheels struck ground on the far side of the road. Thousands of witawu rose in instinctive self-preservation from the doomed steede and its misshapen rider. They soared skyward, separated at last, hung, then plunged into the water less than ten meters from the field of flameberries.

A great hiss, suddenly extinguished, made the Conducs cover their heads. A plume of water shot skyward and fell back to the surface in warm rain.

When they dared look again, the columns of bubbles rising from the bottom were moving slowly out to sea.

The sun watched from the gathering mist with a single, unblinking eye.

Above the place where Arcweld had disappeared the witawu circled, droning sullenly, sorting themselves into their proper swarms. The languor of Harvest resettled over land and sky now that the call of the radio waves had ceased.

Book Three: DELBET

XI

HE FELT scared when she looked at him that way. Before she had

been old enough to be called Lady, she used to scratch and bite and kick when he teased her and she got really angry.

She did not do such things any more. Now the kicks and bites and scratches came in her words and from her eyes.

They hurt as bad. Worse, maybe. They gave you the same feeling you got when you met up with a tree tigress nursing cubs and did not have your slingbow.

She was pretty as a tree-tiger cub, too. Real pretty. Especially when she was angry.

"What did you tell him?" she said. "What did you say to him, Del?"

The giant locked his big hands between his knees and squeezed till the joints cracked. He did not know how to lie. "Why, Shev—I didn't tell him anything more than he'd already seen or guessed. I could see all the time he was mad—nursing something inside—like about that night when he—"

"What?" She spoke softly but with menace. It was like a faraway thunderclap.

"Why, that night when you came down into the camp dressed up like a Conduc and—"

"No, not that!" The words slammed shut on the memory. "What? What did you tell him?"

Del looked up at the sky. It was a dome streaked with clouds—whorls, anagrams of vapor. A Harvest sky, hugging storms.

The deck of the vessel throbbed to

the beat of the crude stern-mounted engine. Delbet shifted uneasily.

"He could have wrecked the task force, Shev. He was plotting all the time. I—"

"What? *What*, I asked you. Not why."

"Well—I told him how it was. About Mandanar and about how you read in the library about the sun running down and—well—nothing much, really. Nothing I didn't have to." He cracked his knuckles again. He stared at morning and the face of storms in the sky.

"And?"

"Well, Shevvy—"

"You told him about the Tower and the Awakening. You told him that, too. Didn't you?"

"Shevvy—"

"You dummy! You witless, long-legged spifly! I should have left you in Spadox with Keren right from the start. A talue's got more sense—"

"I had to do it, Shev. The morning before we went down into Westward City Three he saw me. He was in the scrub up there on the mountain. I didn't tell you before. I'd broken camp to go hunt talue. He saw me, all right. He heard me pitch the call. He was a Helangle but he wasn't like an ordinary Helangle."

"And you: You!" The girl threw all her fury into the words. Although she and Delbet were alone on the high deck in the prow of the boat and talking Superom, the well deck below and behind them was crowded with Thetans. Any other violence

would have betrayed their disharmony. "And you are not Superom! You would have done better working the cruze mine!"

He stretched one arm to restrain her, but the expression on her face froze him.

"Listen," she said. "I told those lispings, colorless, slimy creatures everything that was going to happen to them if they didn't return me and the casket to the surface right away. I intuited they were waiting for someone—someone who had promised to come but hadn't. After two days they were really scared. And do you know what they told me? They told me a dwarf was in the city on the morning of the ambush. A Helangle who opened his mouth like this—" She snarled, drawing back her lips in a spectral imitation of Arcweld. "They said he had a magic box. A box like those their ancestors sometimes tended below ground for the masters. They said it had a Superom prisoner inside it. Eh? You—do you know what that means?"

The giant stared at her. He was too scared to think. He always became fearful when Shevvy got angry. He swallowed and shook his head.

"He was spying for Keren," said the girl. "Keren got to him at the Spadox gathering. He sent him on the expedition with a transceiver. They fixed the ambush. The Submets should have got you, too. You realize that, don't you? When they had us down underground the dwarf was

going to bring Keren flying. That would have finished us all!"

Delbet's face flushed. His mouth opened and shut. Then everything softened into a huge grin of relief.

"But he's dead, Shev. Gone! The witawu got him. He drove off the cliff into the water. A whole tribe of North Shore Conducs saw him go under. It was right near where Mutch drowned. He's dead. We don't have anything to fear from him."

"Oh, Delbet." The girl shook her head. Her anger was melting into pity for the big simple man. "The dwarf probably told Keren everything. The one way Keren can get out of Spadox is by convincing the Thetans we tricked them in order to carry off Karel's casket. If the dwarf gave him your—your confession, he'll use it. He'll be on his way now to break the expedition."

Delbet listened glumly as the girl spoke on.

"Why do you think I insisted on traveling through the night to Port West as soon as you got back to the city? Why did I bully the Water Conducs to take the expedition in their fleet and sail before sunrise?"

Delbet stared down at the deck. "Well—Shev—Keren's not here. And I guess he could have been if he wanted. After all, he has the aircar."

Shevan looked up at the sky. It was empty.

vessels. The waters throbbed with the beat of their engines. Their square sails flapped, sucking for a breeze.

Even though many thousands of Thetans had gathered at Port West to see the expedition off, it had taken Shevan's fierce persuasion and the stern words of Floridian, their chief, to raise the Water Conducs and their fleet before dawn. Thetans had been afraid of the dark since the lights of the Superom had gone out six hundred years ago.

None of the sea-harvesters had ever sailed to the far shore of the West Water. None could say what was there. Delbet had found the North Shore people suspicious of the unfamiliar, the people of the fishing waters to the south reluctant to risk their boats and thus their livelihood.

But Shevvy with her soaring passion—the awesomeness of the mysterious casket, carrying a supposedly living Superom of the Great Age—the legends of the Superom's return recalled aloud by Floridian, these had finally sprung the sailors from their beds and families.

The sea stretched before them, unbroken by any sight of land. The sun had risen only a short time before, a sun dispirited as if sensing its own mortality. Before long, the loops and trails of cloud spun into a sheet masking the sunlight. A squall twisted down from the north.

Stirred by invisible spoons of wind, the heaving water sent the boats reeling. Sails slapped, and canvas tore, ropes parted. A single ex-

AROUND them the morning sea was white-winged with a fleet of

plosion of thunder was drowned by rain. The cruze-powered engines continued to churn the boiling waves but their thrust was puny in contest with the wild water and wind.

The Conduc sailors had been caught off guard by the sudden storm. Only one or two crews got canvas down and trimmed their boats in time to run before the wind.

Two or three vessels were swamped. Another, broadside to the wind, capsized. The Conduc autos and Helangle steedes and terrified cadels and tribesmen thrashed and sank together.

The storm wrought its havoc for about ten minutes. Then, outrunning the surviving vessels, it churned away southward, an angry colossus of wind, mist and rain scudding across the face of the sea.

The boat that carried Delbet and Shevan pitched and rolled in the quieting wake of the squall.

Varso, the Conduc fleet captain, climbed painfully to the foredeck. He was long-haired and bearded, as were all the Conduc. His huge deep-set eyes had dark bags of fatigue under them. A metal collar engraved with the tribal constellation indicated his office. He had fallen heavily during the storm. His left arm was bruised and the hand swollen.

The two Superom cousins watched him. Delbet did not feel sick because nothing unsettled him, but Shevan had to bite her lips and dig her nails into the palms of her clenched fists to hold down her nausea.

Varso raised his uninjured hand in salute. "We're going about, Delbet Sir. There may be survivors."

The giant started to nod his agreement but Shevan said, "No!"

Varso looked at her blankly. So did Delbet, his mouth hanging open.

"No. We must go on. Five minutes, and probably there'll be another storm."

"But—" Varso gestured at the sky. Delbet followed the gesture. The sky was as innocent and cloudless as a child's eyes.

"Go on I say!" Shevan's face was ashen but her voice had an edge like broken glass. "Go on. I will not have the casket endangered."

Varso glanced appealingly at Delbet. The giant turned away. In the storm he had pushed Shevvy under one of the bulwarks and held her there. He was soaked and battered. His black cap of hair had been torn apart. Strands of it were matted to his ears and forehead. Mandanar seemed a million years away in another galaxy, the journey purposeless, the pain and hazards futile.

The Conduc fleet captain stood motionless. He seemed stunned.

"Go on!" Shevan insisted.

Then, as though she commanded some supernatural power, the weather spoke irrevocably. Shrouds and webs of mist unexpectedly spun from the north to wrap the sun again. A new wind shrieked down at them, flinging the vaporous Thetan rain and the mounting waves against what remained of the fleet.

From pale sunshine to the heart of fury was a few seconds' transition. This time the remnant boats were already pointed to run from the storm. None was swamped or capsized.

The giant once again held the girl against the bulwark with his body. She clung to him, moaning, her face pressed into his belly. The rain was almost fine enough to breathe and drown in. It was as if Keren had invoked some secret meteorology of his own to wreck them all.

This time the storm lasted longer. When at last it had funneled away into silence and the sky hung out the watery sun, the fleet was well scattered. Vessels dotted the southward vista.

From the command deck in the stern Varso's dark eyes stared sullenly forward at the two Superom, but he did not approach them again. The threat of another storm brewing in the north was enough to stifle thoughts of turning back.

The flotilla leader signaled the scattered craft to crowd on power and run south. He did not look behind. Anyone who had survived in the water after the first squall would have a long swim ahead of him.

The enginemen coaxed their crude motors to peak effort. The boats ploughed through the water. The sea was still choppy and fidgety from the violence that had seized it not long ago.

More squalls developed through the morning but they ran farther and

farther eastward. The flotilla did not have to change course again.

Still, it was well into afternoon before the lookout shouted, "Land!" Slowly the two wings of the Bay of Anselm came into view, like a giant claw reaching to grab the flotilla.

ALTHOUGH the sun was shining brightly now and the only remnant of squall was tumbling like a boiling cloud along the eastward horizon, the bay looked threatening. Behind it extended the great cracked stone jungle of the old Superom from which the bay took its name. The new Anselm, where a South Shore Conduc tribe had settled to establish a fishing colony, included the foreshore and the patched jetties and piers of the old city. Dark lifeless hills hunched around it.

Varso had obviously been to Anselm before. His boat was recognized while still a long way offshore. The Anselm folk stopped their work and waved and shouted. Varso took the flotilla close in. The inhabitants obviously knew which pier he would choose and began to crowd it.

There were eight boats left of the twelve that had set out from Port West. Varso jumped ashore to be greeted by the colonial chief. Men, women and children pressed forward, excitedly staring at the Superom. Varso held a shouted conversation in dialect with some of the elders. There was a good deal of wise nodding and gesticulation, fist-

brandishing and finger-pointing at sea and sky.

"They say we should shelter here tonight," Varso told Shevan. "They have good reason. Morning storms are often followed by evening storms on the West Water."

Varso stared at his feet. Few Thetans who had faced Shevan once in disagreement were likely to try it a second time.

Shevan was looking at the sky. Delbet followed her gaze. All the enemies born of time were on high. The old senile sun. The fading artificial sun of the Superom. The silent dome of blue that reminded him of the old observatory dome with its fragmented inscription. The image of Keren, looming in the gaint's imagination like a storm cloud...

"Besides," the Water Conduc said, seeing Shevan's hesitancy. "We shall need all the light left today to repair our damaged boats."

"Very well. But you must rig fire-ore lamps, as many as are necessary, and work through the dark if need be. We must leave at dawn tomorrow. This expedition must be on the far side of the West Water by tomorrow night. We must cross the Graystones before the beginning of longnight. That is not far away."

Shasem, the Anselm chief, scratched his beard and spoke briefly to Varso. The South Shore dialects were further removed from the Thetan tongues of the Western Shore. Shevan had difficulty following the chief's words.

Zedward the Saivainte, who had survived the storm in the flotilla's flagship, leaned toward Shevan and murmured, "Although he is difficult to understand, Shevan Lady, I believe that he says the journey from Anselm to the far shore will take at least two and a half days. He gives the reason but I do not—"

The girl's eyes blazed at Varso. "Nonsense!" she exploded. "The books and the maps say that it's a day's journey. It is two days' time direct by vessel from Port West. How can it be longer from here?"

Varso spoke in quick, broken sentences to Shasem. The South Shore fisherman listened. His cheeks had paled with fear when the Superom demigoddess spoke in anger, but his eyes were stubborn.

Shevan listened impatiently. All the other Thetans crowding the deck of the vessel in council kept their eyes lowered.

"Well?"

"There is no waterway from Anselm—" Varso spoke rushed and fearful phrases—"other than the way that skirts the Place of Rocks, Vamin Darma. No Conduc of these waters will cross it although it is said to be possible. They fear. They fear the monster Khedau."

The fisher Conducs hissed at one another when they heard the name. Heads shook, bearded chins raised and eyes peered fearfully past the claw of headland into the westward sea distances.

"Khedau?"

Another ripple of fear and discontent.

"What is this Khedau?"

With as much gravity and poise as Zedward himself might have mustered the colonial chief said something in his own dialect which nevertheless needed no translation.

"Khedau is Khedau!"

Faced with the fear behind the monumental simplicity of the old man, Shevan was silent for several seconds. Then the Superom intelligence asserted itself again.

"Listen to me." She raised her voice. "All of you who can understand, hear me. I, Shevan, a true fruit of the Superom, am a monster more terrible than this Khedau. And I go to Mandanar where I shall find the means to recreate the power of the Superom so that Thetis shall be great again.

"Also I carry with me the secret mind of my forefathers. Its knowledge is enshrined in the living body of Karel, the same Great Karel who lived among Thetans when Thetis was great.

"Del, tell them to bring the casket on deck!"

A PARTY of Caxitine Conducs helped by several Agorans manhandled the casket from its place of safety to the deck. The fisher Conducs of Anselm hung their heads. The awed silence that descended upon the Thetans in Varso's boat radiated outward to the other boats and then along the piers and jetties

and through the Longshore colony. The old crumbling stone jungle seemed to move a few paces closer to the sea. The clap of wind on rope and the slap of water on shore and hulls and piers were the only sounds in the bay.

In the silence the casket shone ghostlike. Inside its sea-deep emerald light the old man slept. The fluctuating levels of the instruments set into the casket confirmed the flicker of life preserved for six centuries.

Shevan spoke again.

"These are my powers. At Spadrox on Awakening Day, Karel spoke. The message was that we should bear his casket to Mandanar. These are my powers! I and Delbet Sir, my cousin, are Superom. Superom who made Thetis and colonized Thetis do not fear any monster of Thetis."

Delbet stared sideways at her. Always when she was opposed the fury coiled up tight inside her. It made her slender frame quiver like a hunting animal's, poised and ready under the taut blue suit.

The giant stared miserably at the enormous peace within the casket that could impose silence on the whole colony and bay. Only he and his cousin knew the truth of the speech on the Awakening—now when she spoke deception was heard as truth. Delbet shivered, remembering how he had foolishly taken the dwarf Arcweld into his confidence. If what Shevan had guessed were true perhaps one other knew the truth about Karel's Awakening. Keren might be

planning now to follow them from Spadox. He might even be on his way.

Shevan finished speaking. Once more the casket created silence. Finally Shasem whispered a few sentences hoarsely to Varso.

"Well?" said Shevan. "What does he say now?"

The flotilla leader cleared his throat.

"My brother says that he gives reverence to Great Karel. He says that he rejoices in the mission to recreate Thetis. He says that he respects the powers you are gifted with. But he says that none of the Conducs of the South Shore Anselm have sailed through the Vamin Darma. They would not because of the Monster Khedau. There are no charts, and if one of the norther Harvest squalls such as today's blew down the fleet would be wrecked."

Shevan stamped her foot. "And you!" she exploded. "What do the Conducs of Port West say? I don't ask for the favors of these superstitious barren-landers! What will the South Shore people of Port West say—Varso's people—if I ask them to carry Great Karel across the Vamin Darma in a day?"

Varso was silent. Del could imagine behind those dark, sleepless eyes the memory of a sailor's agony, unable to turn back within earshot of drowning men. At last he said, "We must repair the storm damage. Tomorrow when we see the dawn sky we shall be better able to decide. My

men are weary. They have lost companions today and are dispirited. How can I ask them to answer tonight?"

"He's right, Shev. Let them—"

"Shut up, Del." The girl shook off his restraining hand impatiently. She breathed deeply and considered.

"Very well, Varso. But understand—we leave at first light tomorrow unless the weather's against us. See that the refitting is well done. If your men work well you may breach the cargo of sanpandan we took from the submets and brought with us. But it is to be strictly controlled. The work first—the sanpandan as reward."

"As my Lady commands."

The conducs of the flotilla worked on their boats. Squads of colonists helped them.

Four boats had to be raised from the water to repair hull damage incurred below the waterline. When the light drained away behind the dead hills and the elder sun came out, fire-ore lamps were hung in festoons.

Shevan, Delbet, Zedward, Aplan and some of the other Thetan leaders of the expedition spent the night inland in the caravan of the Anselm chief. But the Anselm Conducs were wary of the Helangles. They gave them a place outside the sandhill ridge above the caravan circle.

Only seventeen of those who had set out from Port West remained beneath the command of Starhowl. They quickly pitched their tents,

forgetting the terrors of the day's journey and the loss of their comrades in the thrusting and crowing evoked by their women.

SHEVAN stood at a window, staring uneasily at the distant harbor. The noise of the work going on there blew in from the sea.

"They are mending their boats," she said, "but they were afraid and they are still afraid. The Thetans' world has shrunk so. They fear to go beyond a very tight horizon. Varso hasn't forgiven my harshness this morning when I wouldn't let him turn back for survivors. I can't trust him to carry his men across the Place of Rocks."

"Sometimes I envy the Helangles." Zedward was wrapped in the gray cloak he had drawn up to protect his head from the chill evening. He peered through the inland window of the caravan toward the ridge. "Perhaps we of the Decline would have been happier if we had greater sensual appetites and a more limited intelligence as do they."

Delbet's forehead wrinkled in a frown. Homan the young Caxitine Conduc roared with laughter. "I think my broader Caxitine intelligence helps to deepen my appreciation of sensuality. What do you say, Delbet Sir?"

The giant shook his head. He cracked his bony fingers. He felt hot and ashamed. Aplan, Homan's father, frowned at his son.

"Love—" mused Zedward.

"Love—that's what the Superom taught us—"

Delbet rubbed his jaw.

Love. Love was the warm, silver beauty of the talue pulsing in the hand, surrendering its crystal treasure of fire-ore. Love was the silent beauty of the machinery striking up, down, back and forth, glistening with oil.

Shevan shook her head. "I can't trust them. We must keep a watch."

"Maybe it was not wise to promise to let them breach the sanpardan," said Homan. "It makes us argumentative and the Saivainte very pompous. The Agorans just go to sleep. But the Helangles get spiteful."

Zedward looked at the girl. Slowly she and her cousin were becoming less remote and godlike, especially to Thetans of their own age such as Homan. Their decisions could be discussed—not challenged yet, but discussed. They were less exalted, more of the people. He sensed Homan felt that by the way the young Thetan spoke.

Shevan shook her head. "No. I said they might breach the sanpardan as reward. I won't go back on it. Del, you must keep watch on them—you and Homan. He'll go with you.

"Make sure that Varso explains correctly to his crews. Be sure you convince him if he wavers that we, the Superom, have the power and that we fear no monsters. And keep the Helangles away from the sanpardan.

"Varso should speak to the sailors

before the casks are breached. Old Shasem mustn't blind them with horrors of this Khedau when their wits are dulled. Homan, you must translate if Delbet requires it."

The two young men got up to go. The giant gave his cousin a wounded look but Homan seemed content.

Zedward, gray beard drooping onto his thin chest inside the cloak, hooded his eyes. It would have been better to have chosen Aplan, he thought. He looked at the girl. He was an old Thetan. He licked his lips, but did not question.

The young men had gone now. It was too late.

XII

IT WAS still dark when Delbet opened his eyes. Before he realized that the scythe of pain swinging back and forth behind them belonged exclusively to him he saw but failed to recognize the blind disk of the old sun. Far overhead in the pre-dawn sky it peered down through the swinging bars of pain like an incredibly old jailor staring down into a cosmic oubliette.

Then the pain made him groan, a groan with long cords reaching back to his stomach. He fought through torture to his hands and knees and there, four-legged, he was sick and then again and again and again until his stomach was a knot of cramp. And when the dry retching was finished he heard the sound of mocking laughter above his own noise and

saw that the darkness held more than the old sun's face.

Through the water in his eyes and the pain behind them he saw legs and feet which could only be the withered limbs of a group of Helangles. Among them was a single pair of feet, one sandaled, the other bare. Raising his head between the blows of the scythe the giant saw that the feet were Homan's and that Homan was upright only because he was supported between the Helangles Kickstart and Cleavewind.

The young Caxitine was alive and groaning as Delbet had groaned, but the giant was swamped by a new wave of nausea when he realized that Homan's wide-open eyes saw nothing except eternal night.

And after the giant tried to vomit again and couldn't he wished that he himself might be at least temporarily blind—for he was forced to look at the terrible face of his cousin Shevan.

"They have gone!" she stormed. "They saw a raw landsman and a simple giant! They fooled them with 'friendship.' They poured the juice of a plant into them and made them dummies. And when the dummies closed their eyes and snored like kiltawi in the longnight they sailed away! Varso took his men and his ships and we're left here with these superstitious primitives of Anselm!"

Delbet was kneeling before her. "Forgive me, Shev. I think I'm dying. Please forgive me."

He recalled now trying to be wary. He remembered the way the prized

liquor of the Submets had foamed from each cask as the sailor Conducs had breached the sanpardan. He had held back; but Homan's shouts of laughter as he joined in the celebration, and the merry bearded faces of the Conducs crowding about him, and the hands slapping his back and urging him to honor the party under the stars, and the swinging fire-ore lamps—these had overcome him.

The Conducs had roared with laughter as he had choked and sneezed, potent brew jumping down his throat and fizzing up his nose. He had drunk again and again to prove his manhood. Before long the stars had begun to collide and the harbor and newly repaired boats had swarmed with bearded sea-smelling friends dancing and fighting and deliriously daring to embrace this Superom, to put their bearded lips to his ear and tell him rambling stories he did not understand. And after that there had been only the dark—the dark through which the pain struck at him again and again and again.

"Forgive me."

But Shevan was furious with him now and she struck him with the blind, wounding rage of a child as he knelt before her. When she exhausted herself and her fists fell to her sides and the only rage remaining flowed in tears from her eyes, old Zedward, the scholar Thetan, and Aplan, the father of the blind Homan, led her gently away.

She sat on a hewn rib of timber

and stared out over the bay. The ships of the Port West Conducs were long gone. There was not even the sound of their engines, only the empty sounds of water and sky—the new day coming up with the shrinking sun.

She looked defeated. The power of obedience she commanded had begun inexorably to slip from her as the expedition journeyed farther and farther from Spadox. The fear of Superom power was giving way to the potency of more immediate gods.

"We shall have to take some of the Anselm ships. We must cross to the Graystones before Harvest-end." She spoke as though to herself, though Delbet followed her humbly across the beach. Behind him trailed the three tribal leaders, Zedward, Aplan and, scuttling painfully, the Helangle called Starhowl.

"I say go around," said Starhowl. "Don't dig this lousy water. Makes storms, makes rust. Shags up the cruze cells. I had a mindmap of this once. I say around only takes two, three days and it's safer. Besides we would need crewmen and those Anselm jerks won't go past this Khedau thing."

"No," said Shevan. "I can save two days by crossing. Besides, I think this monster is only a figment of someone's imagination."

"The Anselm people won't go," said Aplan. "They would rather die here. They're really scared of Khedau, whatever it is."

"And you?" Shevan turned to the

Conduc leader so abruptly that her cousin jumped in surprise.

The three chiefs stopped in their tracks.

SHE faced them, a soft sea breeze stirring her hair, proud head and shoulders etched onto the disk of the rising sun behind her.

Aplan cleared his throat. "I—" he started. "We—that is—the Caxitine Conducs are not really sailors, but I think we do not fear without reason. I would be prepared to explore—"

"Zedward?"

"I have been thinking," said the old Saivainte. "Trying to pick out of all my memories of all the books I have read what this creature could be. I'm sure the Superom eliminated all the primitive sea-beasts of old Thetis."

"But will you come with me? Will the Saivainte come and risk this Vamin Darma?"

The old man raised his bony shoulders in a shrug of resignation. "Those of my tribe are scholars and teachers. We have always been close to the Superom. If you command—"

"It ain't one of the old monsters," said Starhowl. He fidgeted from one hand to the other, a mannerism common to all Helangles divorced from their steedes. He pummeled his wrinkled strip of forehead with his free fist. "Jerksville—that mindmap's really beat up. Hell! It's got giant eyes—real big—like this—" he whirled his arm in an impossible circle

"—bright—big eyes. And a cry like a hit tree tiger." He thought awhile. "That's all I can call up."

"I see that the noises from your tents aren't always howls of lust. Sometimes you have nightmares, too," said Shevan. "Your people are mean and tough. They fight. Will they come?"

Starhowl looked abashed. "Sure! Hell! If not, I'll beat the hell out of every one. Like, okay, so I'd rather have the land. But—hell, I wasn't stalling I remember. We gotta get Great Karef to Mandanar." He licked his lips.

The girl nodded. "Cousin?" She was still cold to the giant. She would not use his name.

"You know I'll go wherever you want, Shev," he said humbly.

She turned and began to pace forward again. "Good. We'll take two boats—only two. It's foolish to risk many lives. Those we don't need or who are afraid to come with us can return overland or any other way to the other side of the water and their homes."

"Shasem?" Zedward queried. "The old man? Will he release the boats? Will you be able to find crews? Where have the Anselm Conducs gone? I have seen none since the Port West people fled. Perhaps they're hiding in the hills?"

"No," said Shevan. "They're here, lying low in their autos. Maybe they think we'll go away by road. But I'm going to cross the West Water. And I'll take Shasem with me. If I take

him as hostage his sons will come. They'll handle the boats. And we can prove to them that this monster threatens nothing but their stupidity."

"That's if we survive, of course," said Aplan softly to his two companions.

Fortunately for him the breeze blew his words away from Shevan. She pressed forward in command again, gaining confidence with every step.

The Anselm people had only two boats with cruze engines and Shevan commandeered them both. She was in no mood to listen to any contrary pleas. She let the unlucky colonists know she held them equally to blame for the departure of their kinsmen to Port West.

She organized a ruthless Helangle foray into the nearby stone jungle to fetch Shasem, who had slipped away from the camp to what he thought was a place of safety. The dwarf riders, relishing their new role as Superom shocktroops, brought the old man back tied to a litter. Shevan had him taken straight to a boat and then had his sons Edvart and Stanlyn rounded up.

By the time the two boats were provisioned, the passengers selected and Conduc crews press-ganged, it was afternoon again. Due to yesterday's storms and the defection of Varso's flotilla the expedition had lost one more precious day.

It was a grim departure. The Anselm sailors were terrified. The many

Thetans who had traveled this far with the expedition only to be left behind watched from the crowded shore as the two boats floated out into the bay. Aplan was among these silent spectators: Shevan had released him to care for his blinded son.

The bleak hills crouching around the bay and the corpse of the old stone jungle decaying below listened to the beat of the stern engines as the boats moved toward open water. The mournful wails of the Anselm people could be heard from the shore. They were convinced the crews the Superom had forced into the boats were going to their deaths.

Shevan did not look back—she had been forced to abandon many faithful Thetans. Now she had neither Agorans nor their nervous, long-necked cadels. Of the Saivainte she had brought with her only Zedward. She had carefully chosen ten Helangles, led by Starhowl, and balanced them with ten of Aplan's Caxitine Conducs. These, together with the reluctant Anselm Conducs, Delbet, herself and the casket were the entire complement that sailed into the open sea and set course westward again.

DELBET stood in the prow of the leading boat two hours outside the Bay of Anselm. During the last half-hour the Anselm Conduc had grown increasingly agitated. The face of the helmsman had slowly changed to the color of sour milk. His lips trembled and his hands shook on the wheel.

From the bow of the lead vessel the cry of the lookout was the only human sound between sea and sky. "Vennel shahah—vennel shahah—" The monotonous chant repeated every fifteen seconds: "Clear water—clear water—"

Delbet listened, shading his eyes, staring into the distance against the flashing waves. He was the first to hear the chant falter.

He glanced sharply at the lookout. The man's eyes seemed to have grown too big for his skull. The tension dragged his head forward; his neck sinews were taut cords. His short sand-colored beard jutted at the horizon.

The impression lasted only an instant, but to Delbet the man looked as though on the point of having a fit. Then compulsive training asserted itself. "Vennel shahah—" he wailed. "Vennel shahah—ap candor Vamin Darma!"

A chorus of groans and shrieks greeted the sighting.

Delbet peered ahead.

Even had he not caught the last two words the ripple of fear that ran through the Anselm sailors would have translated the call. The quality of the horizon had changed. The unbroken line of water was fuzzy with light.

The giant felt a cold hand in the pit of his stomach. Something of the fear of the Anselm Conducts seized him. He swallowed, shading his eyes again, staring ahead.

The lookout repeated in a choked

voice, "Ap candor Vamin Darma! Ap candor—ap candor—" Slowly the man shrank into hiding in the lookout post.

Delbet realized his cousin had joined him. She said nothing. He saw her face pucker in a scowl as she stared ahead with him into the sun. Her mouth, usually full and mobile, tightened into a hard line.

"Dead ahead, Shev."

She nodded. "I see it."

The giant kept his eyes shaded. It was something for his hands to do to avoid their betraying his racing disquiet.

"Looks pretty much like an atoll or reef or something," he offered diffidently. "Don't see much there like a monster to get scared of."

Shevan gave him no comfort. "Wait. We aren't close enough yet. Right now we'd better get back down into the boat. The Anselmites are on the point of diving overboard."

They were. The Vamin Darma was becoming clearer every minute. Already most of them were nearer to it than they had ever expected to be. They could see it from the main decks now. The horizon's fuzziness was caused by light on breaking spray. The area must lie amid cross-currents, the giant thought. There was little wind to whip the water into such waves.

Several of the Anselm people had fallen flat on the decks from fright. All the Anselmites were ineffective now. Even terror of Shevan and of

her Superom intelligence could not outweigh the terror of tribal legend. And their terror communicated itself to the Caxitine Conducs, who looked gray and anxious and muttered to one another. Even the Helangles, largely insulated from fear or foreboding by their blunt senses and their belligerence, could not entirely escape the strangeness of the moment. A few of them clung to bulwarks with their wrinkled hands, staring at the approaching unknown and jibbering at one another in their short colorful phrases. The fear had spread as well to the second vessel, where Shevan had left Zedward the Saivainte and Starhowl in command.

Both boats moved inexorably forward.

When she was sure the vessels would sail on without the help of the sailor Conducs, Shevan hurried forward again. She no sooner got to the bow decks than the luckless lookout was finally galvanized out of his rigid terror. With a shriek he launched himself from the cockpit into the water.

One of the more alert Helangles tried unsuccessfully to grab him as his head bobbed past in the boat's wash. The terrified sailor swam astern. Although he was heading for certain death in that huge expanse of water he did not cry out again or try to rejoin the boats. Transfixed by his horror of the Place of Rocks ahead, his only thought was to put as much distance as he could between it and himself.

Other Anselm Conducs tried to follow his example. None got away from Shevan's boat, but before the Caxitines and Helangles on the second vessel could secure them several sailors tried to leap overboard. Those who succeeded followed their comrade, swimming strongly as though the shores of the Bay of Anselm were still in sight, to a common end. Those left aboard wailed and groaned in misery.

Edvart and Stanlyn, Shasem's sons, rushed along the deck. Although they were both full-grown men they flung themselves on their father, howling like distraught infants.

The reason for the Anselmites' new frenzy was soon apparent to Delbet. He raced along the deck and joined Shevan in the prow just behind the lookout's empty cockpit.

The Vamin Darma got closer. It was spreading over the entire western horizon. The breaking water and light-drenched spray no longer hid the shoulders and crags of innumerable small islands, fissured and pitted by long erosion. From the turbulence of the water it was clear that from every island visible extended dangerous reefs perilously close to the surface.

But it was not the menace of this alone that made the West Water sailors howl. A terrifying shape threaded through the spray and the leaning crags, looking for all the world as though it had been alerted by the vessels' approach.

"The Conducs' monster! The Khedau!" shouted Delbet.

THE GIANT felt Shevan's hand grope for his in alarm. When she found it she gripped him convulsively and her touch was ice.

The approaching form, cylindrical but tapered slightly toward its apex, was taller than the tallest crags. It was still nearly two kilometers distant when, just below its top, a great saucer-shaped eye of light opened.

It seemed to wink at them, then swiveled away. A moment later a second lens was brought to bear on the boats and held them in a longer blinding glare before it closed again.

The boats were still heading directly for the looming figure when the first turbulence in the water hit them. They began to pitch and roll.

The Khedau wove through the hazards of the Vamin Darma with practiced skill. It swung unerringly past rocks and crags, sometimes swaying in some furious disturbance but always righting itself. Its eyes glared from one boat to the other. Free of the main skirt of rocks and moving northward along their face, from somewhere inside the Khedau came a long, hostile roar.

The howls of fear were no longer confined to the Anselmites. Caxitines and Helanges joined them.

Holding convulsively to Delbet on one side and the Bulwark on the other Shevan shouted over her shoulder, "Starboard ninety! We'll run

head-on into it if we go any further."

Whether or not he heard all she said through the din the Caxitine steersman recognized the danger and flung himself against the crude tiller. The rudder turned and so, more slowly, did the boat, yawing and groaning.

There was a collective shout from behind them. A wave had broken over Zedward's boat. It staggered about uncertainly. In terror of the roaring monster on their port beam and of the water pouring around their feet, the crew fought one another to bail or to find a place of safety.

"What is it? What is it, Shev?"

She stared at him briefly. Then her eyes flickered back to the swaying, glaring beast and its fearful home.

"No wonder they were scared."

"We'll never get past it. It's ten times faster than we are. Hell. We ought to turn back."

"No," she said. "Look—watch it carefully—"

The two young cousins clung to each other and to the boat's side as it lurched through the heaving sea. Through the mist of spray they stared at the tall guardian of the Vamin Darma.

It was still moving parallel with them to northward, skirting the seaward fringe of the rocks, gliding between crags and outcroppings, undulating through the surf, glaring and roaring.

"You know, Del—it isn't—it isn't—"

A long shout from the second boat interrupted her. Zedward the old Saivante stood in the prow waving his arms, hailing, gaunt.

"What is it? What's he saying, Shev?"

"What I was just going to say, I think. Zedward's a bookman too. I think he's seen it. Just as I've seen it."

With both arms she signaled Zedward to bring his boat closer.

Delbet caught a word or two as the gale tore up the old man's shouts and scattered them downwind. The giant turned back to stare at the towering Khedau that opened an eye then closed it again in a gigantic wink. The Khedau and the boats continued on parallel courses across the north face of the Vamin Darma. The monster gave no threat of attack. Its cries seemed somehow admonitory rather than threatening.

Suddenly Shevan was laughing, helplessly laughing. It had the mad, solemn illogic of a nightmare: the tossing boats, the stalking monster, the clashing water and grinding teeth of the Vamin Darma.

Zedward's boat drew alongside. Its volunteer helmsmen were a couple of Helangles. They coaxed and shoved and cursed the engine but were careful that Shevan's boat remained between them and the Khedau.

Zedward held the rail. He was shouting against the noise of the water and the boats and the monster in the surf.

Shevan put her hand to her mouth. Her eyes ran with tears of relief. She moved toward the rail to be nearer to Zedward.

"The Khedau!" he shouted. "Khedau! There is a word like it in some of the old hill dialects of the remote Conducs."

"I know what it is, Zedward," the girl shouted, through another bout of laughter. "Don't you?"

"The word had the dual meaning 'guide' as well as 'guardian.'"

"Not the word. I don't need the bloody etymology lesson. Do you know what the Khedau is?"

Delbet glanced confusedly from one to the other and then at the prowling, glaring monster a few hundred meters away. It changed course and moved westward again. It opened a wide eye of light and glared back thoughtfully at the boats—beckoning? inviting?

Zedward cupped one hand to his mouth. "Not a monster—made—your people—Superom—set down at sea—in the dangerous sea places—"

Shevan's head nodded vigorously. "That's it. It's mechanical. That's exactly it. One of those beautiful, everlasting things my people made. And it has gone on working because it doesn't know how to stop."

The giant shook his head in disbelief but Shevan continued.

"Every time a boat comes near it sweeps out to warn it of danger and guide it to the clear channels through the rocks. When the Superom left the Conducs lost their history, and in

their minds the Khedau degenerated into an ogre ready to devour them. A monster in a monstrous place. Something to be feared. But it's just another of your beloved bloody machines, Del! It's a guideship! We have only to follow it and it will take us across the Vamin Darma."

XIII

YES, she was right. Shevan was right. As she was almost always right.

Within two hours the remnant of the expedition crossed the Place of Rocks with its frightful crags, drifting spray and clutching currents. The slender Khedau was left to resume the patrol that hardly a boat had disturbed for six centuries.

By moonfall of the next morning the glaring, shouting mobile watchtower dropped below the steep curve of the Thetan horizon and out of sight. By moonset the boats rolled through the gentle surf of a beach. The expedition had finally crossed the West Water.

From Shevan to the most frightened Anselmite deckhand, everyone was utterly exhausted. As soon as the boats were beached, however, all helped carry the casket ashore. Then they found a place in the dunes beyond the beach and slept.

When morning arrived, Delbet, on top of a dune, stared out to sea. The shrinking sun was already high in the sky. It seemed to shrivel visibly each day. Del believed it, too—he had

become convinced of the truth behind Shevan's mission.

Northward, the two Anselmite vessels were small on the surface of the West Water. In spite of Shevan's demonstration that the Khedau was a friend rather than an enemy the sailors' primitivism had quickly reasserted itself. No sooner had they put out to sea than Shasem gave the order for them to bear north. The six hundred years of night were still more potent than an afternoon of a girl's determination. The Vamin Darma remained a forbidden area. The Khedau was a monster they dare not provoke.

This surly reversion to superstition was like the closing of a door. What was left of the expedition was finally cut off from those areas which had maintained some link with the Thetan past through the enclave at Spadrox. The remaining travelers found themselves in totally strange country—country that had never had any existence for them other than on maps or in memory.

The lip of this side of the West Water was the lower end of the curve of a vast geographical bowl, once the crater of a colossal volcano. Remote in the distance, a chain of mountains marked the rim of the plateau. The tundra stretching out shadowless on all sides was gray: the gray of infertile volcanic shale that gave the Graystones its name. Here and there rifts and cairns of rock relieved the flat landscape, but apart from some sweeps of moss as gray as the stone

to which it clung there was no sign of plant or animal life in the whole immense saucer.

The cart that had carried Karel's casket from Spadox had been left behind at Port West. The light fishing vessels of the Water Conducs had not been able to cope with it. The expedition now had to rely on a much cruder vehicle hastily knocked together by the Caxitine Conducs and towed by two Helangle steeds.

The column was wholly dependent upon the dwarf scouts for mobility. None of the Conduc autos had been able to cross the West Water. The only choice left was to take turns walking when there was no room on the improvised vehicle.

The expedition moved out of the small fertile area bordering the mud and sand flats of the inland sea and set out across the desert toward the ragged range of mountains to the west. The sun stood directly overhead. Even at noon it seemed drained of all fire in these last days of Harvest.

Shevan urged the expedition forward, allowing very little time for rest or food. She chilled them with threats of what could happen if the longnight came early, bringing the cold and winds down across the tundra from the north.

The coming of evening found them still on the plain, many kilometers from the seashore. When the sun set and allowed the ancient ghost sun of Thetis to tremble in the sky, Shevan's apprehensions found a cool

endorsement. The temperature dropped rapidly.

The expedition made camp. The Helangles were sent to gather up what fuel they could find for fires. Later, in that camp deep on the Graystones, Superom, Conducs, Sainvainte and Helangles lay on a common ground warmed by common fires and ringed by the steeds arranged with the cart into a protective outer wall.

Not since before the departure of the Superom—perhaps never—had representatives of so many of the Thetan races made a common camp. Karel's casket lay at its center. As the firelight died the casket's faint emerald glow intensified. It threw a little of its frosty, sea-floor light across the forms of the sleepers.

Not only did the Helangles provide the only means of transport, they had the only means of shelter. More accustomed to nomadic life, they lay by their steeds, grunting and twitching and snoring in the open while their less hardy companions made what comfort they could of the Helangle tents.

Few people other than the dwarfs slept well.

TOWARD dawn Delbet woke. For the tenth or twelfth time that night the freezing breath of the plateau had numbed him out of sleep.

The fires were out, mounds of gray ash. Here and there curled a wisp of smoke. It was still a long way

from light; the old ghost sun was slipping below the horizon and the Superom sun had not yet risen. Delbet lay watching his breath condensing against the sag of the hairy tent, barely large enough to contain his giant frame. The cold had stolen into his legs and shoulders. He would have liked to return to sleep but could not.

Something moved against the cone of light at the tent flap. The giant flexed, immediately wide awake, but before he could sit up or reach for his slingbow he recognized the faint girl-scent of his cousin.

"Shev?" he whispered uncertainly.

She crawled in beside him. "I'm frozen. I've been—I've been awake. This bloody place scares—"

"Aw hell, baby. Why didn't you come wake me before?"

The slightest chink in her armor, the smallest hint that she could slip back to the unquestioning trust in him and dependence on his strength she had felt as a child, never failed to melt his heart.

Her body was taut as a drawn slingbow. Her teeth chattered. He put out his arms and cuddled her to him. He stroked her hair. She began to relax but she kept shaking. Her hair reminded him of the beautiful waterfall-colored coats of the talue. Her neck and shoulders felt damp beneath his gentle hand.

Shevan kept her ice-cold fists clenched in front of her. The giant felt them pressed like arctic rock against his belly.

"I feel like I've been awake for hours," she whispered. "I was scared the cold might do something to the survival systems of the casket. I got up to have a look at it. Del—something happened. Something out there on the Graystones."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Del twisted his head trying to look down at her but her face was too close up against his chest. "What happened?"

A convulsive shiver racked her from head to toe.

"The old sun was just dipping down to the horizon as I came away from the casket. I thought I heard something. Or maybe I didn't. Maybe I just felt—intuited it. Some trailing end of a dream or one of the scouts moving. They talk a lot. They dream a lot. This cold—"

"Anyhow, I was by the cart. I looked out underneath it, between the wheels. For a moment there was nothing. Then, suddenly, there was something—"

"Across the old sun. Kind of thrown into relief, silhouetted. Something."

"Uh-huh. What sort of something?" The giant kept stroking her hair. "What sort of thing, Shevvy? Man? Animal? What?"

"I don't know. I—it was so quick. A shadow, falling across the bar of light."

"Dreamed it," he said, "You dreamed it."

"No. No, I didn't dream it." She moved and he realized that the whole fly-front of her suit was gaping open.

"Hell!" he said. "You dumb little cub, you! No wonder you're cold. You got damn near nothing on."

Her little fists divided and she slid her arms around him. She lay trembling. "Del—oh, my dear—"

The giant moved uneasily. She changed so fast. He never knew what to expect. She'd be strong and passionate, determined, for days, even weeks on end, bullying anyone who opposed her, scaring the brutish Helanges, lashing the Conducs with her tongue, matching intellects with the Saivainte. Then suddenly she'd need to come to him, need to be held and petted and comforted like a child.

"Listen," he said, "it's nearly sun-up. Let's get out of this torn old Helangle blanket and get something to eat. I'll make a sweep around camp. See what I can find."

"Wait," she said. "Wait, Del."

The giant felt a strange tenseness in her body. She was waiting for something, too—like the moment before diving off a rock for the pool below; the instant before triggering the slingbow, before the bolt hisses through the air. He felt her thighs tremble. Every part of her was poised to strike or suffer or submit.

His movement onto one elbow was a reflex. He fled from this mood that had transported his cousin. He rolled out of his blanket quickly. He tucked it around her. Her pale face stared up at him from the cocoon. It had a remote, ecstatic look. "Stay here. Keep warm. I'll go take a look."

"What do you feel for me, Del?"

What is it that you feel for me?" The edge to her words and her great, dark eyes, so like those of the other cousin left behind in Spadox, restrained him. They held him better than her imprisoned hands, forced him to bend over her in the gray light.

"You," he said, "you're dreaming. You're still dreaming. What do you mean, Shev?"

"No I'm not," she said. "No. You answer me, Del. What do you feel?"

HE KNELT staring with scared earnestness into her face. Again he did not understand. He shook his head. Demands that he put into words what it was easier to sense and to let be embarrassed him.

"Well," he said, "I just want you to be happy. I want both of us safe and happy. Like it used to be at Spadox when you were little and I wasn't much more than as high as an ordinary man. Just—for you and me to go on living in sight of each other like that—"

The clumsy words stopped. She looked at him with a sustained look that searched deeply. Her eyes closed. Her lips parted. She touched her top lip with her tongue.

"Go! Go on out, you big child! Go catch yourself a bloody talue—"

Confusion, fury, tenderness overlaid by an unrelenting will to be. His cousin seemed to wage a constant war against something she could not control, something forever holding her back from that edge of being.

These spiky thoughts harrowed the giant. He felt he had been punished without reason. He did not understand. He slunk away. The darkness accepted him.

He moved through the camp with expert stealth. No one woke. One or two of the Helangles stirred and muttered. Odd words fumbled through a net of dreams, turning and writhing in throats.

Del crossed the perimeter of the camp. The land was dark. The sky was flat, a pale, uniform fish-belly silver.

He was unarmed but did not feel afraid. This was dead land with nothing but the fallen images of rocks. There were few places where anything could hide.

He spiraled away from the camp in concentric sweeps. He acquired a new sense in these circumstances and intuitively searched for tracks where shadows denied his eyes purchase, where neither moss nor volcanic rock held any scent.

He found nothing. A hundred meters from camp, crouching so his giant frame would not be silhouetted against the sky, he thought about what Shevan had seen or thought she had seen.

He found himself instinctively examining each potential lair within striking distance of the camp. There was nowhere anything could hide. His eyes followed the profile of a monolith toward the skyline and back down. He looked again, moved on, came back to it. The machine in

his brain would not let him leave the massive form. He frowned with the effort of fusing his conscious and unconscious thoughts.

He stayed crouching in the silence and the slowly developing light. He went over the rock contour again and again. Then he remembered what Shevan had said. And he got it. Something silhouetted against the ancient sun which was now the moon of Thetis' night. Something silhouetted against the old sun. But what Delbet saw was a great band of cloud across the horizon. The old sun would not have been visible as it set. And the mountains themselves would have prevented anything appearing in silhouette—anything which was not mammoth or walking the mountain tops.

The giant listened to the dawn rising on the lifeless plain. The hair on his neck prickled. He remembered the day when the twisted dwarf Arcweld had seemed to grow out of the ground in the hillside forest above Westward City Three, just before the first of the expedition's many troubles had begun.

He had already started back toward camp, when the first cries of dismay unwound him to his full height and brought him running.

Smoketrail was missing. The remaining Helangles were scuttling around shouting at one another and calling for their lost comrade. There were few places in the camp where he might be. It was soon clear that he was gone, vanished off the face of

the night plain as though into its very air.

Someone identified his steede stacked among the others in the camp's stockade. Kickstart remembered that Smoketrail had slept to his left in the outer circle of Helangles, right at the camp's edge farthest from the watchfires.

Starhowl organized a search party. They roared off to circle the area and investigate any crevice or outcrop that gave the merest hint of shelter. Four Caxitines also left the camp on foot at sunup to search the immediate neighborhood.

Shevan watched their frantic efforts with dark dispassion. When Del came back to camp she was already out of the Helangle tent talking to Zedward. She looked pale and remote, as though she had endured some major physical crisis. Her eyes were huge and hollow in her pale face.

Delbet pretended to busy himself with a minute inspection of the outer perimeter where the missing Helangle scout had slept but the giant was within earshot of the girl and the old man.

"—What was it like?" Del heard him ask.

"A shadow," she said. "The relic sun was setting. I looked out between the wheels of the cart. Something crossed the bar of light. As if leaping down to the earth. Arms like this—but not really arms—"

—Del watched her shyly. She raised her arms so they formed an acute

angle with her shoulders. She had momentarily acquired the wings of a bird.

"Then it was gone."

The image troubled the giant, but he could not think why.

TWENTY minutes later the Caxitine Conduc found Smoketrail. He was dead.

Moving in a circle they had worked their way behind the camp, covering the trail the expedition had followed just before stopping the previous night.

A little to northward a fault line in the rock substrata, split by old earthquakes, formed several connected hollows full of tumbled stone. At the lowest point of the biggest hollow, water had collected from the Harvest dews—one of the reasons the expedition had made camp nearby.

One of the more alert Conduc noticed that the water was a strange, dark color. It was fouled by blood. A red trail led to a vertical crevice in the adjacent ravine. There, hardly concealed at all, was the cold body of the Helangle scout. He had died instantly from a clean thrust in the neck. The weapon had vanished with his killer.

It was a primitive crime and the Helangles reacted primitively. They first accused the Conduc, but when the Conduc violently protested that they carried nothing that could have inflicted such a wound the dwarf scouts turned upon each other. Those who were from Smoketrail's

own pack accused the others. The 73 City South and other packs made an uneasy alliance, claiming that Smoke-trail's companions from the West Helangles had done away with him because he had been ambitious.

There was no explanation for the murdered man's leaving the camp alone at night. No one could guess why he should have walked the two hundred meters to the ravine. The pool seemed the obvious explanation, but plenty of water had been carried into the camp to last the night.

Although the quarrel among the Thetans continued till the sun had risen high Shevan did not intervene. Time was being lost but she seemed to need to stay by the casket and talk earnestly to Zedward. She refused to go to the ravine. In the end the giant and Zedward had to ride down with a party of Helangles and find a place to bury Smoketrail's remains.

Everyone was frightened and depressed by the conjunction of violent death with the apparition Shevan had seen in the night. When they finally set out in moody silence, even the sky seemed to conspire against them. The sun appeared only occasionally from behind great ramparts of cloud sweeping down from the north. Huge menacing shadows stalked everywhere across the Graystones as the cloud squadrons galloped overhead.

When the expedition camped that night the Helangles, dusty, weary and sullen, found fuel to build watchfires.

Fear sank their ill humor and encouraged them to make a pact with the Conducs and among themselves that allowed agreement on mounting a guard.

Delbet said he would take his turn but had no intention of sleeping at all that night. Hour after hour, whether on guard or dozing with his feet to the fire, his hunter's senses were turned to his cousin's tent.

She was a strange child. Since last night she had grown still more impenetrable, remote, hardly acknowledging his existence. All day she had said nothing to anyone but Zedward. Delbet had seen the old Saivainte regarding her with gravity and pity.

The night passed. Nothing happened. The relic sun began to wane. It looked down now and then, an old invalid peering from between scudding clouds. In the morning the expedition was intact.

Slowly they moved on, all that day and the next. The Graystones did not trouble them with any further horrors. The continually threatening cold did not descend. The shadowy mountains neared.

"Beyond them and on the tableland is the Galactic City of the Superom," said Zedward. "Mandanar the impenetrable and secret, where Great Karel can be awakened by the marvels of his people."

It was Zedward's turn with Delbet to ride the cart. The giant stared up at the sierra ahead and nodded, replying as the cart bumped over the plain.

“And what if it’s dead like the other stone jungles? What if Shevan misinterpreted a sentence—just a single phrase—on the talktapes and followed the paths through the words the wrong way?”

“In that case one thing at least is clear. We would not be able to return to Spadox. Not without great hardship. Those of us who are young now would be old and those of us who are already old would die on the way.”

Delbet thought bleakly about the kind of homecoming they might expect at the enclave. But by the time they returned, Keren himself might be dead and the Thetans might have forgotten the existence and purpose of the expedition. The Regent’s face fastened itself on the giant’s mind and would not let go.

These thoughts were like a premonition oozing up through cracks in Delbet’s consciousness. He tried to put them out of his head, but even while Zedward was talking, bumping alongside him in the cart, the images took hold, shutting out the old man’s words.

A few hours later the second calamity of the Graystones struck.

THE GIANT was constantly aware of the powers at work on Thetis: the force of wind and rain; the trembling cold of the longnight; the senescence of the preterite sun; the warmth of the star his own people had set alight in the sky. Because of his essential simplicity he

was always conscious of the struggle between these and the men who clung to existence on the planet. So the events of that afternoon and evening, as the sun disappeared behind great banks of cloud and a threatening wind rose, could not be disentangled from the forewarning of the evil face that had haunted him as he rode on the cart.

Not long after the midday break one of the Helangle scouts sighted an old Superom road. It crossed the Graystones from north to south, near the first slopes of the foothills of the mountain range.

Spirits soared. Following Shevan’s directions the expedition hurried south, searching for a road junction to take them through a mountain pass and onto the plateau which Zedward said lay beyond.

They found the road after traveling for two hours, then moved westward, but stopped in the late afternoon at a point where the road crossed the foothills before joining the pass into the range. A problem was upon them.

Soon they would need cruze to replenish the fuel cells on the Helangle steedes.

Shevan, Delbet, Starhowl, one of the Conducs and Zedward sat together under the scowl of cloudbanks and the shadow of mountains and talked for almost an hour.

Starhowl was prepared to go on. Shevan had not yet completely escaped the trauma of three nights ago, and she sensed in the others the

apprehension of running out of fuel in the mountains. They agreed that although several hours of light remained they would camp there that night.

"Now we're off that place," said Del, with a jerk of his head to indicate the Graystones, "we might be able to dig some cruze out of this rock."

The Conduc looked doubtful. The Caxitines were expert miners.

"We wouldn't have the equipment to get at the purest ore. We might get some out of the surface but then it would be too crude. We'd need re-finishing equipment."

"One way or another we have to get cruze." Shevan pressed her cheek wearily with her left hand. "We can't walk over the mountains in the longnight."

"Maybe we could make it," said Starhowl. "Like coasting downhill and using the motors for up—huh?"

Shevan said, "We can't risk it. On the plateau we'll probably find Conducs who will have supplies. But we can't trust ourselves to go into the mountains without having some reserve."

"Shev, I guess I ought to take a party. We'll move up toward the mountains. That's cruze ground if I ever saw any. The Conduc says we can't mine the rich ore. He's right, but we can manage on crude if there's enough of it. If I can get up high enough on one of the mountains and strike a seam that's been cut out by the weather—"

"We need you back before night-fall. We can't split the group here, right next to the Graystones and at night."

Zedward cleared his throat. "I was wondering," he said, "if you could find a cave. These mountains and the desert were very thinly inhabited. Probably the outcrop cruze hasn't been touched—"

Delbet clapped his thigh with delight. He would have thumped the old man's shoulder had he not feared Zedward might collapse into a sigh and a handful of dust.

"Zedward's right! If we can find a cave—there might be an exposed seam."

Shevan nodded. "Very well, but remember you've got to be back before dark. Del—"

She looked at her cousin with another of her enigmatic looks, so troubled and troubling. But now he was too captured by Zedward's idea to pay much attention to Shevan's moods.

Within ten minutes a party had been selected and was on the move: the giant, two Helangles and two Conducs.

The Helangles rigged a litter between their steeds for the others to ride. With two hours left until sunset they roared off along the junction highway, climbing steadily for the hills.

Delbet made them break across country after about half an hour. One of the Conducs had drawn the giant's attention to a red-streaked

fold in one of the hillsides. Though the fold might not indicate the presence of ore-bearing rock the face itself was split and had formed from the second generation intrusion rock of Thetis. This rock frequently carried ore and was soft enough in certain strata to erode into cave formations when exposed to weather or subterranean water.

They had to cover the last three hundred meters on foot as the ground became progressively more rock-strewn.

At last they stood in a saucer-shaped clearing looking up at the folded rock. One of the Conducs walked over and scraped away at one of the red streaks with a probe from his prospecting kit.

Del moved in behind him, watching the dust fall. As the probe bit further, the spurting dust in the tube began to glow feebly.

"This is it, Delbet Sir. First strike."

"First strike!" The smiling giant looked ready to jump up and down with pleasure.

"It's weak," said the second man. "Debilitated. Probably wouldn't even kick a cell. Been too near the surface for too long."

"Yes. Okay. But it is cruze ore. There should be a richer source nearby."

LEAVING the Helangles on watch, the Conducs and the giant set out to search for a cave that would

reach into the rock far enough to touch a worthwhile seam of cruze. There were a number of fissures which began promisingly, but they quickly petered out.

The Conducs had begun to climb the face when Delbet found a cave.

He had started moving around the hill to see whether the prospects looked more promising on the other side when he heard a familiar sound.

The sound itself was a good omen. A huge grin of pleasure split the giant's face. The sound was repeated: the warning whoop of a talue. A second later a flash like a question mark written in water curved against the rock and then dissolved.

The giant froze, but the talue had seen him. He sprinted, almost as soft and elegant as the creature itself, and saw the eye-shaped gash in the ground into which the talue had disappeared.

To the left of it was another, much larger hole. Rock that attracted talue would carry fire-ore and its mineral relation, cruze ore. Although the two elements acted volcanically if brought into contact they existed side by side, dormant, in similar strata.

"Here!" Delbet shouted.

When the others reached him they found him crouched, peering into the gloom of a tunnel which shelved steeply toward the base of the hill.

If there were rich deposits of cruze-bearing ore anywhere below the hill the sloping cave would lead the party nearer to them.

The Conducs lit their prospector's lamps and lowered them into the cave. The light caught the faint glint of water. The soft strata of the intrusion rock had been worn away by some subterranean spring; the hard strata had been left to form a good shelving chamber. To judge from the light the cave was large enough for a man to occupy with little more discomfort than a stoop.

Delbet looked at his two prospecting companions. They both nodded.

The giant called to the two Hel-angle scouts. "One of you watch the mountains. The other watch the highway. If we aren't out of the cave by the time the light starts to go from the desert, come down and warn us."

The dwarfs touched their crash-hats in acknowledgment. One of them left his bike and started to climb the ridge above to get a view of the mountains.

TWO OF US will go in as far as we can. We'll fasten a line out here." Delbet started to tie a rope to a boulder near the cave mouth. "The other must stay clear, someplace where the tunnel entrance is still visible. Be ready to give help or call the Helangles if the front men get in difficulty. Okay?"

"Okay, Delbet Sir."

"Right. I'll go." The giant started to lower his bulk into the cave. Three minutes later they were all under-

ground. Delbet paid out the rope as they moved through the cave by the light of the prospecting lamps.

After forty meters the cave forked. Both forks were too narrow to permit Delbet to go far so he returned to the junction where he could see the entrance as a gash of light in the darkness.

His two companions crawled into the fork which they judged to lead under the hill. They and their lights were soon cut off from Delbet by further twists and turns, although he could hear them for a long time talking to each other and rattling loose stones as they pressed forward.

Ten minutes went by. Fifteen. The entrance seemed much farther away than forty meters. The two black mouths of the forked ways were dark, silent. It was cold and solitary underground. The water of the lost stream whispered occasionally. Now and then a random drop of water fell from somewhere overhead.

The giant jumped when the first drill started up. It was twenty-five minutes since the Conducs had entered the tunnels, yet their drills sounded so loud they might have been only a dozen meters away, just around the corner in the darkness.

The two drills whined together for a while. Then they stopped. Then one went on alone on a different note.

Delbet, who had spent much time devising machinery for the cruze mine at Spadox, recognized the change in pitch as the solo drill

struck into the old hard rock of the Thetan substrata. The Conducs were ambitious. They were going for a rich seam, probably trapped in a layer of intrusion rock between two layers of hard rock.

The sound of the prospecting lasted twenty minutes. It was followed by a long silence.

The giant strained his ears to catch the sound of the two miners returning. He crawled a little way down the secondary tunnel and listened. There was no sound.

He went back to the junction and tested the cord. It was tight. Where it vanished upward the eye of light at the cave entrance was still bright. The drilling started again.

Delbet tried to imagine what was happening under the hill. Maybe his companions had struck an isolated pocket of ore and exhausted it before they had sufficient amounts. Maybe the rock looked promising but had concealed only a burned-out deposit.

The second round of drilling stopped shortly. In the new silence the giant waited anxiously. The underground cold had begun to strike at his bones. He had been in the cave more than an hour. He looked back and up at the mouth. There was not much time left before the Helangle guards would come to warn him of sunset.

Delbet yawned and flapped his arms in an effort to keep warm. He listened then knelt and peered down the right fork of the tunnel. The

Conducs were returning. He could hear them. His eyes caught dribbles of light from their lamps. At the same moment a pebble fell down the shaft behind him.

He strained his neck to look back again to the entrance. The thought was still in his mind that one of the Helangles would appear there soon to warn them it was time to start for the camp.

As he looked up something twisted across the light, brushed past him and fell to the floor of the cave. The giant jumped away reflexively and in the same instant realized that what had fallen was the rope they had used to let themselves down the incline to the cave floor.

He was baffled, then angry. The rope could not have slipped accidentally from its anchor. He stared belligerently up the slope to the entrance. Maybe one of the Helangles had tripped on the cord and torn it free.

There was no one visible up there. Delbet crouched on his haunches and felt around the floor until he found the fallen rope. He sat in the gloom, fingering the end of it. There could be no doubt about which end had come from the surface. The other end was still fastened to a spur of rock at the cave junction. And the surface end had been severed—cut through.

Cut! The giant stared in disbelief at the end of cord in his hand. The sound of his companions approaching along the fork was getting

louder. Delbet looked up yet again to the entryway. Surely the Helangles had not cut the line—what would have been their purpose?

He opened his mouth to shout but realized in time that it might panic the two Conducus returning with the cruze ore. He started to scramble up the incline, trailing the rope behind.

He was less than halfway up when the aperture suddenly grew heads as though some fertile medium sprouting a bacterial growth. Six faces appeared simultaneously on all sides staring down the hole. They were all fiercely bearded. None of them was Helangle.

DELBET was so startled he neither moved nor spoke. He did not know if they had seen him. It was possible they had not, looking from light into darkness.

One of them grunted a short comment to another. The giant recognized a Conduc inflection in the speech, but it was in a dialect he had never heard.

Without betraying his position by movement he called out in the universal tongue.

“Hey! You there! What the hell did you do to my rope?”

The effect was dramatic. There was a split second’s pause, then all the heads withdrew as magically as they had appeared.

Delbet felt a chill. He rushed up the incline. Rocks showered down as he scrambled for the exit. His hands were torn, his legs grazed. Below him

in the pool of darkness at the junction he heard some worried bleats from the Conduc miners who were nearing the end of their tunnel but he could not stop to reassure them.

He was still too far away when like a tired old eye the entrance began to close. He saw what was happening and with an immense effort flung himself forward and upward to jam a small rock into the closing gap. He hoped it would give him a second longer to escape the trap.

The rock held momentarily but the force steadily shoving the boulder over the exit was too great. Delbet’s rock wedge sprang away, missing him by a whisper, and bounced down the incline, taking a minor avalanche with it.

Only a few minutes before the trace rope had been secured to a boulder. Now the rope lay at the bottom of the first shaft and the boulder firmly blocked the cave’s entrance. Delbet and the Conducus were trapped.

The giant clung to the rock and shouted through one of the remaining open cracks.

“Listen—you out there. I am Superom. I am Delbet Sir from Spadrox. Superom! I order you to move this rock and free me. Superom here, I tell you! Do you know what the punishment is for disobedience to the Superom?”

He listened, panting. The outer-world was quiet. Grunting with the effort he fought to move the rock plug but everything worked against

him. The cave mouth was almost horizontal; the full weight of the boulder rested against it. And the only footholds were no good. Delbet could not get the full power of his shoulders under the rock.

"You!" he shouted again. "Hey—you. Answer me! *I am Superom.* Answer me!"

There was still no response. Then after several seconds a voice broke the silence. Its owner was obviously standing prudently far from the cave, probably concealed behind rocks in the clearing. He spoke in the universal tongue, but haltingly and badly.

"Superom don't coming out of the ground. Superom coming from the sky. You are not. We are going for get real Superom who returned to us from sky. You stay!"

"Come back!" shouted Delbet. "Come back! There are no Superom left in Thetis but those in Spadrox—"

Then he realized the significance of what the mysterious spokesman had said. The giant stopped abruptly, his mouth already open to shout again. He swallowed, leaning against the rock and the cave wall. It might just have been a translating slip. The man had spoken the universal tongue very crudely. Like the fusing of two channels, the giant's brain related two things: what his captors had just said and what Shevan had seen three nights past.

"What is it? Delbet Sir—what's happened? Is it night? Why didn't the Helanges call us?"

Forty meters down the cave, Delbet made out the shapes of the two Conduc miners. Now that the entrance was closed the darkness was thicker, more oppressive, but he could see them.

"We're trapped, my friends," he said. "Strange people have sealed us in. I don't know who they are. I don't know what has happened to the Helanges. I don't know what's going to happen to us. But they'll be back and I fear who may be with them."

XIV

THE first Conduc said, "It's dark. I'm getting cold."

"I'm afraid," said the second one. "What's going to happen?"

"What lies beyond the ore face?" The giant peered restlessly into the yawn of the first fork. He had no comfort or answers for his scared companions.

"The passage goes on, but it gets wet and even narrower. I wouldn't like to try it without a proper team Behind me. And you couldn't even make it to the face, Delbet Sir."

"Don't worry about me. If there is a chance to save yourself, take it. And if you can get to the surface you might be able to reach camp and raise the alarm before the new ones get back."

"No. We stay with you." The Conduc spoke the same words in a single voice.

Twenty minutes had passed since the cave had been sealed. Delbet had no means of knowing how far the

raiders might have to go before they could return in force with the menace their words had promised. It might take an hour or two. Or, if they had to go as far as the plateau, it might take a day or more.

It was dark outside. At the foot of the incline darkness was almost total. Cold had begun to probe their bones.

They were already overdue at camp. Shevan would be watching the fading ribbon of highway and cursing him again. Their only hope was that one of the two Helangles might have escaped and warned the expedition of what had happened.

The two Conduc prospectors attempted to dislodge a section of the boulder by drilling but the huge rock was solid pre-intrusion stone. They abandoned the attempt when it was clear that even if their drills held out it would take too long to cut away a section large enough to permit escape.

The smaller of them went down the left fork to see what chance of escape it offered, but the passage funneled down to less than a meter diameter and was half-full of icy water.

They all sat together now, backs against the cave wall, staring up into the shaft. If they could not find a way around the plug they would be trapped until their captors returned.

"Go," said Delbet. "Both of you. It's your only real chance. Even if they come back for me they won't be likely to follow you into the fork. And you may find a way through—"

"No." They spoke as one.

Both the Conduc miners were thoroughly frightened. Stubbornness increased with their fear. All three men were listening for any sound that would indicate their captors were returning.

"What's that?" hissed the small man.

"Sss!" Delbet warned. They froze into immobility.

From the extremity of the incline came a faint but unmistakable scuffling. The giant reached through the darkness and roughly gripped an arm of each of his companions. Both were shaking as if fever-ridden. He tightened his hold, willing them to silence.

"Hell's fire!" The word came out on his own breath, but so faintly it could have been part of the darkness.

The scuffling sound approached them from the surface down the tunnel in short rushes. Suddenly Delbet's lips parted on a short breathy whistle. Both Conducs were incredulous. To them it sounded as though the giant had magically produced a talue from the air above their heads. There was an immediate answering whistle from midway along the incline. The scuffle had stopped.

Delbet whistled again and the talue that had come into the cave flashed forward, dislodging a flurry of earth.

The giant called again, encouragingly. The little beast made another darting rush but then gave a quick whoop of warning and fled.

"Hell! Scented us!" Delbet relaxed. Far above, the talue's claws scabbled on the rock as it slithered from the cave. "But that's it—there's a chance—"

"How?"

"What do you mean, Delbet Sir?"

"Conjunction," said the giant. "Cruze. Fire-ore. The talue collect fire-ore pellets. If we can catch one with a fire-ore pebble—"

"Explosion!"

"Blow the plug!"

"That's it."

"But the cruze—it's not refined."

"It won't matter. We won't need a big explosion. I think the cruze in the ore you've collected is rich enough. You found a good seam."

"How are you going to catch the talue?"

The giant's mind was already racing. "I wish I had a slingbow and bolts! But it will have to be net and noose—"

"Net?"

"The line. Start unraveling it. There'll be enough strands in it for net and noose both."

They switched on the prospecting lamps. They had been conserving them for an emergency, but this was the emergency.

FIFTEEN minutes later they were in darkness again at the head of the incline. Through the largest remaining crevice between boulder and cave wall they could just glimpse the sky and the dark hump of shadow that was the spur of a hill.

The Conducs positioned themselves so that the rough net they had made was spread to wrap any talue Delbet could snare.

The giant moistened his lips. His heart was pounding. He warbled the talue call into the night.

They missed the first two but soon developed their technique and coordination well enough to catch one. Four talue later the trapped Thetans found the first piece of pouched fire-ore.

Delbet insisted they continue. Time was passing, but a single piece of ore might be inadequate. Nevertheless, after they acquired three more pieces he was forced to give up. The local talue colony was at last becoming suspicious. The intervals between animals responding to the lure were getting longer.

The prisoners retreated to the foot of the incline. Working by the light of the lamps, they used three out of the four cylinders of ore to make three crude bombs.

As the two elements were brought into contact eruption would commence immediately and within a few seconds the chemical reaction would produce an explosion. Hence the fuses would have to be long. Delbet and the two Conducs shredded the cord of the line again until they had three long threads. Then the two Conducs climbed back up the incline and placed the three charges close together at the top of the crevice where there was a surface flat enough to hold the nuggets of fire-ore. They

wedged the inverted canisters of cruze over the fire-ore fuses. They had cut thin metal wafers from their prospecting kits to separate fuse and charge. When the threads were pulled the disks would be drawn clear. The cruze would fall into contact with the fire-ore.

Delbet's thread broke as he pulled it; due to his anxiety he had jerked it too hard. But the Conducs were more expert. Orange fire, molten and potent, dripped from two places overhead, lighting the darkness.

The volcanic power from these set off the third bomb.

The three men scrambled for safety. Crouched in the right fork passage out of the direct path of the blast they saw the light change quickly to red, to white. A small eruption followed by a big one sent stones and earth spraying down the tunnel.

Delbet and the other two scrambled up over the warm rubble. Through acrid dust and fumes they could see that their makeshift bombs had blown a great gash in the cave wall. The imprisoning plug had partly fallen into the hole but more than enough room was left to set them free.

They ran. Near the entrance to the first dip they found the remains of the Helangle steedes. They had been painstakingly smashed, the wheels torn and buckled. There was no sign of the dwarf scouts.

Much of the night had passed. The sky was clouded but already slate

gray light on the eastern horizon announced sunrise.

"This way." Delbet led them up a ridge, due east toward the camp. "If their fires haven't gone out we should be able to see them from the top."

The giant stood amid rock and shrub at the summit and stared eastward. Far away, like a great lens, the invisible West Water focused the gray pre-dawn light against the clouds. But on the humped back of the Graystones desert between the horizon and the foothills, the last of the night settled like a black bird.

The giant sank to his haunches. He ran his tongue over his lips, still dusty from the explosion. The Conducs joined him.

"Where? Where are they?"

"Can you see them?"

Delbet shook his head.

"No." He pointed. "They ought to be somewhere there. To the right of the highway."

They looked together. There was no glimmer of light. If the rest of the expedition were there the watchfires had been allowed to burn out.

If they were there . . . But the giant knew what to expect as light crept across the plain. Full daylight revealed the desert to be as empty as it had been before the expedition had arrived. Shevan, Zedward, Starhowl and the precious casket had all vanished.

THEY were without food or water. They had no transport.

Behind them lay the barren Graystones; ahead, the pass across the mountains and the possibility of encounter with the hostile band that had sealed the cave.

Certain that their enemies would return, Delbet and the Conducs moved to the south of the road and spent all day hiding in another cave trying to decide what to do.

Two things were clear. The disappearance of their friends was due to the arrival of the hostile natives. And the three stranded men had a choice: either starve or freeze to death between the Graystones and the mountains, or risk capture and try to reach the plateau beyond the mountains.

"There's no question," said Delbet. "We can't stay here, not with longnight coming. On the other side of those mountains and to the west on the plateau stands Mandanar. Even if it really was Keren who came down from the sky in the aircar—even if he has control of the Thetans on the plain and has captured the expedition, Mandanar's where he'll head for. He'll take them there for sure."

The Conducs looked at him and at one another, then lowered their eyes. The thought of Keren in power again and powerful enough to have abandoned Spadox frightened them. They might have chosen the wrong side.

"Besides," the giant continued, "if we can reach the plain we may find some of your people to give us food and transport or just plain news of

whether they've seen Shevvy and Karel's casket."

AT FIRST they moved only at night, parallel to the highway, trying to use what cover they could. The road was always empty. Not once did they see a sign of the marauding tribe. Delbet imagined that, having achieved all they needed to in a single night, the natives had withdrawn to the plain beyond the mountains.

Probably they had no intention of returning. The cave was to have been a convenient tomb. If the interment had been at Keren's prompting, his cousin would now think Delbet dead. That might give him the benefit of surprise if rescue were possible.

As they climbed higher into the mountains the nights got colder. Freezing mist often hid the sky at dawn and one evening the wind from the north had snow on its breath.

They had not seen any sign of other humanity. To make haste they moved onto the highway and traveled during the day. They were thin, bedraggled, footsore. Delbet took to wearing his Saivante cloak all the time, partly as disguise in case they should be seen, partly as protection against the weather.

They had not long begun the descent toward the plateau when late one afternoon they heard the sound of Conduc autos.

They had passed a road intersection two kilometers back, the first

road junction since the Graystones.

Delbet's first instinct was to hide. He feared that the caravan might carry the unfamiliar tribe of Conduc brigands who had penned him and the miners in the cave. But the trio was sighted and overtaken before they could get far from the road.

The travelers were not hostile although they spoke like the others. They were curious, too, at finding a Saivainte and Conduc from such a distant tribe on foot on the road together but were quick to offer the walkers a lift. When the language difficulty had been partially overcome the leader told Delbet that they were bound for the old Galactic City at Mandanar. "It is said that Superom from Spadrox have returned out of the sky and brought a magic casket with them. It contains the intelligence of one of our former masters, preserved at distant Spadrox but soon to awaken and revitalize the world.

"The ancient lore of our clan contains the belief that such an intelligence was preserved at Spadrox. But it is a very ancient belief and no one has set great store by it for a long time.

"I suppose that you, too, have come to the Plateau of the City for the same reason. The Saivainte are few now and were the teachers of the old Thetis. Your companions say that you come from beyond the West Water. Do you know of this magical casket, brother?"

Delbet kept the hood of his Sai-

vainte cloak shielding his face and tried to copy the deliberate speech of old Zedward. "Yes. It is the body and spirit of Great Karel, who missed the flight of his kind from Thetis. It has been preserved at Spadrox where descendents of the expedition, Superom who were not in stasis, formed their enclave."

The Conduc nodded. "The casket was brought in a machine from the sky by the last two survivors."

Delbet felt his heart slamming against his ribs. He was about to ask a question when the Conduc answered it.

"They say one calls himself Keren, Regent of Thetis, although we have paid no allegiance to any central authority in my lifetime or that of my father or his father." The caravan leader shrugged.

"Who is the other?" asked the giant.

"His woman, one supposes."

The curt acceptance of the obvious bruised Delbet. His brain struggled to grasp the thing that had eluded him for so long, but it slipped away under the Conduc's next statement.

"Messengers have been sent to call us to Mandanar and the old place of the Superom for the revelation of the intelligence."

"Perhaps we may travel with you," said Delbet. "We became separated from our party. We were attacked by a hostile tribe in the mountains."

"Ah!" The leader nodded wisely.

"The Askalan Conducs. They are fierce lonely people of the hills and the desert. Tell me, brother Sainvainte, did you cross the Graystones? Is it the terrible place they say it is?"

While the Conduc caravan moved forward onto the plateau Delbet invented a history of the journey for the old leader. As the giant talked he tried to order his thoughts.

What had happened seemed clear. Keren had somehow recovered his dominance at Spadox. Probably lurid tales of the problems befalling the expedition had filtered back to the enclave. Besides there was no knowing how much the dwarf Arcweld had been able to tell his master before he had drowned.

The Regent, by spreading frightening rumors of the hazard to Karel's casket, could easily have regained power over his Thetan captors. He must have left Spadox in the aircar and caught up with the expedition as it crossed the Graystones. There was no doubt now in Delbet's mind that the strange apparition Shevan had seen was Keren's aircar landing in the mountains.

The Askalan people, cruel and lonely as the mountains in which they lived, would have suited his purposes well. While Delbet and his party had prospected for cruze, Keren and the Askalans had ambushed the others and easily overcome them.

Now Karel's casket was in Keren's hands. Worse, so was Shevan. The thing she feared, the thing she had tried to tell him when she was a

prisoner in the Tower had happened to her. With all his simple will he tried to hold on to it, to understand, but he could not.

XV

HE CAME to the city as though it had always been waiting for him.

After several days' travel, as soon as the friendly caravan made the final turn in the road, Delbet saw it. Immediately he was sure that somehow he had visited or dreamed of this place before. Perhaps this feeling was only a link with the memory of his forefathers; perhaps the vivid recreation of the talk-tapes Shevan had unwound for him was welling up from his subconscious. Perhaps Mandanar was no more than the inscrutable place at the end of a journey—and in the end every journey is the same . . .

Beneath stars glinting like first frost in the pre-dawn sky the old galactic communications center of the Superom was a white wheel glittering on the plateau. Complex roads and support buildings radiated like spokes from the mathematically precise circularity of the central architecture.

Mandanar had not degenerated as had the old cities the rulers had built for their subject peoples. No one except the troglodyte Submets lived in those stone jungles for fear of the awesome and vanished past that lurked there. The Galactic City had

stayed undecayed and inviolate, as enduringly simple and insoluble as a mathematical equation whose terms are infinite.

As they approached, the giant saw a huge gathering of Thetans of many tribes. It reminded him of the assembly at Spadox he and his cousin had effected so many weeks ago as part of their escape plan. But for this gathering there was no certainty of revelation.

Previously his determined little cousin had engineered events. Now that she was once again in the hands of Keren her deception would surely be exposed—unless by some miracle of intuition Shevan had sensed that truly in Mandanar lay means of reviving the dormant Karel and of finding some way to escape the despair of the planet with the dying sun.

The caravan moved through the perimeter of the throng, looking for a place to halt.

Delbet's first instinct was to find and rescue Shevan. After that he did not care whether they tried to defeat Karen and recover possession of Karel's casket or whether she might be persuaded to run away and forget her furious ambitions and be content to live with him in Thetis till the sun went out. Again he had a fleeting sense of some impending, hidden doom, but it would not stay.

After the caravan had settled upon a campsite and had eaten a hurried meal, Delbet slipped away with his two miner Conduc friends.

They decided to split up and approach the focus of the sprawling camp from different directions to see whether they could locate any of their comrades from the expedition. They had no difficulty deciding where the camp's focus lay. The old Superom aircar which Delbet had repaired for the first escape had obviously landed on a small hillock at the camp's edge. Scorch marks patched the ground where the car's vertical lift had thrust.

There could be no doubt now that the shape Shevan had seen in the desert had been that of the landing aircar. Keren had used it to follow the expedition.

His fierce half-breed sons accompanied him. They lounged around the landing point near some rough huts the Thetans had built for them. They bristled with weaponed arrogance.

There was no sign of Keren, Shevan or the casket.

Delbet did not dare go close to the camp. He stooped so that his stature would be less obvious and, as the Saivante were tall, his disguise in some measure excused his height. But the mere presence of what appeared to be one of such a rare tribe made him conspicuous. Fortunately most of the other Thetans—Conduc, Helangles, Agorans and many allied and cousin tribes—were busy with their morning meal, too busy to notice the lonely stooping scholar Thetan stalking through the camp in the uncertain light of daybreak.

Delbet circled the hillock twice at a safe distance. He was not anxious to meet any of the other Thetans from the expedition yet. There was no way of knowing what fears or doubts Keren might have put into their minds about Delbet and Shevan since the Regent had captured the expedition.

"I wouldn't mind betting you're looking for your brother, eh?" A tug at Delbet's cloak and a cheerily loud voice coming from behind him made him spring around in a panic.

AROUND, hearty Agoran had stopped him. The little man looked surprisingly like Mutch, but then most Agorans between the ages of twenty-five and fifty looked alike.

"What brother?" Delbet mumbled. His heart was still thumping with the fear of being exposed. He drew his cloak around him and let the hood fall forward over his face.

"Why now—don't tell me you didn't come all this way from across the West Water without the company of your friend and brother."

"Umm," muttered Delbet.

"Zedward!" chortled the Agoran, "who came with Regent Keren Sir and his lady. Come on! Don't pretend you don't know just because you don't want to be seen bandying words with a vulgar Agoran!"

"Not at all," said Delbet. The little man was making quite a noise. One or two curious faces had already turned to stare in their direction.

"Well, I don't bear you any grudge. You're a funny lot, you are. Living up in the mountains off kil-tawi's milk and cheese. Must be a damn lonely life. Tell you what—your friend's gone into the city with Keren Sir. That's where he is. They went off in the flying machine. I was talking to one of the Helangles they brought with them. Talking! Well now—gibbering's more like. Star-howl—I think that's his name. Anyhow he was telling me how they found this library or something controlled by a machine and full of some kind of old Superom mish-mush and they've left the Superom girl down there to—hey, don't you want to hear—"

With some mumbled words of thanks and apology the giant swept swiftly away. For one thing he had heard enough; for another the garrulous Agoran was attracting too much attention; for a third the formless, rootless premonition had struck at him again. Each time it came it gathered weight. It was as if he wandered along the surface of a sphere of darkness which contained a kaleidoscope of memories, forms, voices. But when he stretched out his grasping senses there was nothing for them to perceive.

He felt sure that the reason for the look of permanence about the campsite was due to the secrets of Mandanar, which remained elusive even to the descendents of the Superom. Keren must have discovered a memory bank in Galactic City. It

would be typical of him to leave Shevan there. He would require her to interpret the stored images and words for him. The possibilities of how the Regent might seek to persuade Delbet's unwilling cousin made the giant's flesh creep.

He could think of only one thing: how to rescue Shevan. All the objectives of their flight from Spadox and her insistence upon the journey to Mandanar sank without eddy below memory's surface. In Keren's hands Shevan's future held only the dark ugly things she feared.

The Superom inheritance on Thetis meant that to kill was an unimaginable crime, but he would need something to set against the potent neuroprobes which Keren and his sons carried at their belts.

When the expedition had been captured the giant's slingbow had been captured with it. He moved slowly along the densely packed campsite. He walked hooded, head and shoulders bent in the oft-seen manner of the Saivainte—lost to their surroundings as though deep in the contemplation of some line of profound thought. But his mind was alert. From beneath the hood he observed everything around him.

Delbet knew that one of the Conduc tribes served the Agorans by hunting the talue and supplying the precious fire-ore to the traders for sale. Many of them used slingbows.

He made a complete circuit of the camp before he found what he wanted. Unobserved, he was at last

able to reach through the open window of a Conduc auto and steal a good bow and a quiver of bolts. He concealed them under his Saivainte cloak.

From the rim of the camp he looked toward Mandanar. He could see the aircar perched near its center like a huge insect.

The morning meal was over. Many Thetan groups were leaving the campsite for the surrounding countryside. Presumably they would hunt food, trade, explore. Delbet left the camp, too.

He circled north and approached the city parallel to an empty road.

The buildings of Mandanar were more awe-inspiring than those that survived in the stone jungles. They were frequently blank-faced, almost entirely windowless, not built of stone but of a metal unknown to him.

The hazard of being seen—he was the only moving thing on the deserted boulevards between the giant spokes leading toward the center—finally overcame his fear of penetrating the secret wheel.

He passed three ramps. They could only have been designed to lead to entries or exits, although these ramps ended in a smooth vertical surface that held no visible clues.

He was getting closer to the center. The motionless mechanical insect rested on the flat surface of a cylindrical structure. Most of its hull was transparent and he could see no one was in it. But its proximity and

thus the proximity of his enemy made him uneasy. He climbed the fourth ramp.

He was three-quarters of the way toward the top before the blank face of the wall relaxed. Its superb mechanisms, obedient, immune to Thetan time, opened an illuminated throat where previously nothing had shown.

Delbet lengthened his stride and found himself at last within a creation made for his own kind.

HE STOOD on a curved bay or platform that was part of an elliptical cylinder. In a wall below him were stacked a number of containers of various shapes, stenciled with hieroglyphs the giant could not understand.

The door closed exactly and silently behind him. He turned and saw that the platform stood on a central column that enabled it to move around the walls of the cylinder under the direction of its passenger. There was no doubt in the giant's mind that the well was a receiving and storage point and that the platform was used for loading.

The top of the cylinder ended in a railed gallery. Delbet was a fly perched on the wall about midway between the gallery and the hold below. His heart began to pound. He realized that if the mobile loader had ceased to respond to its controls he could well be trapped.

He touched the control column with trepidation.

It was pictogrammed for manipulation by robots and could not be misinterpreted. He eased the manual rather stiffly in the direction of the vertical arrow.

There was the trailing edge of a second while nothing happened. Then the vehicle shuddered and rose, jerkily at first but with increasing certainty, toward the gallery above.

The giant moved down a corridor which ran straight for hundreds of meters toward the center. Either side of him were clearly defined doors, each of which mirrored its opposite.

Delbet wondered if they were the doors to living spaces. None of those he tried would open.

The corridor was interrupted only by elliptical galleries identical to the one through which he had entered. As he got nearer to the center they became more heavily stacked with piles of goods.

The fifth one he looked into contained something much more frightening. At first he thought it was a body. Then he realized that it was only some special kind of protective suit, complete with helmet. No body, he told himself as he fled in fright down the corridor, could stay preserved six hundred years unless it had the aids available to Karel. It was just a suit sprawled in an analog of human prostration on the loading platform.

The giant approached the terminal of the corridor. More than once the

lingering premonition of so many recent days insinuated itself into his mind, forcing him to stare back over his shoulder. But if the ghosts or phantoms of his forefathers were here they had not revealed themselves yet.

He saw it as he approached the door: a sign still fresh, a warning that carried across six hundred years of night and oblivion. *Control Area. Check all passes.*

The next second the door was open. There was no one to demand his pass. No one living . . .

The demands the occupants of the control area made on the white-faced giant were those of his sanity.

The control area was not large but must have been a nerve center of the complex. It was tightly compacted with instrumentation and machinery on two levels and the seating pattern and control consoles were designed for manning. The horror of the giant's revelation was that they *were* manned!

They were manned by the collapsed and contorted special suits. With his mouth soundlessly open, Delbet stared in rooted terror around him.

One of the suits had fallen backward into a chair. Its helmet lolled sideways onto its shoulder.

The hollow caves of eyes and the absurdly toothy grin of the skull inside stared accusingly at the intruder. Delbet closed his eyes and looked again. The suit carried the shoulder flash of the Superom Space

Elite, the same badge the sleeping Karel wore at his chin.

The giant backed slowly around the control console. He kept his eyes on the spectral commandant. One of Delbet's hands tracked along the front of the console to guide him; the other gripped the stolen sling-bow.

There were perhaps ten skeletons inside suits scattered about the control area. They had all been suddenly smitten at their work by the brain disease that had emptied the planet of its rulers. These ten, like him in the suit in the loading bay, had not escaped.

And now a new fear thrust Delbet back against the wall, as though to put as much space as possible between him and the relics. Suppose the disease had remained potent all these years. Even now it might be advancing somewhere in his head, slowly extending its murderous tendrils throughout his brain.

He fled. The next corridor was short and the signs over the entry read: *Data Storage. Level One—Classified. Level Two—Recreational. Check passes Level One.*

Delbet could think only of what new confirmation of disaster might lie through the next door. He had momentarily forgotten that he was not alone in the complex and that he had come with only one purpose.

Heart hammering, he stood at the doorway. It opened soundlessly for him as all the other doorways had opened.

Behind him, the dry husks of suits sat at their timeless labors.

Delbet found himself looking again into the dark hollows of eyes. But these were alive; these were the fatigue-ringed eyes of his cousin, Shevan.

They looked at him without hope. They looked at him without recognition, even without belief.

A small frown crossed her face and vanished. "You—" she said. "You're—you're dead. You—are dead, Del, my dear—"

FOR ALL he knew he might be. Inside this creation of the old super race that had dominated galaxy time, planetary and sidereal time had neither meaning nor purpose. Dizzily he knew that if suddenly the white spokes began to spin about their central hub they would soon become a blur. They and everything in them would merge and become indistinct—not subject to time but within it. When he had climbed the ramp and entered Mandanar, Thetis had ceased to be. Yes, he might be dead, or alive, or not yet born; past, present and future were indistinguishable. Within the city he felt already whirling about him, temporal states had been extinguished. He did not know—even now he did not know . . .

The girl half rose from the table at which she had been working. "What are you?" she whispered.

"Shev—Shevvy—it's me, Del."

"They buried you. They buried

you! Keren did. They sealed you in the ground. Keren did!"

Her real grief galvanized the giant. He moved quickly forward.

"No. I escaped, Shev. It's me. I'm real." He held out his arms. When she did not move he realized she was a prisoner. A short, crude chain locked to a ring around her ankle secured her to the table.

Delbet knelt. He seized the chain and pulled it angrily. Shevan gasped. She clutched his bent head.

"No, Del! You're hurting!"

Delbet turned the chain and ring wildly in his hands seeking some way to free her.

"Hush! Listen!" She sank quickly into her chair, pulling the giant's head into her lap. Her hands warned him to be still. The silence rustled in the strange city. They remained motionless for almost a minute. Nothing happened. No one came.

"I thought—" she said in rushed whispers. "Keren—he's gone to the revival sphere. Karel is there. The casket won't respond. Keren and Zedward go there every day . . . Del, my dear Del—it is really you. How did you escape?"

The giant told her in a few hurried sentences how he and the miner Conduc had escaped from the cave and how they had come at last to Mandanar.

Shevan shook her head. "It's all useless," she said. "We're doomed—the last Superom, Keren, all the Thetans."

"What do you mean, Shevvy?"

“Even Keren sees it. He was the last. Zedward saw it before me. Keren wanted to keep me here and to use the threat of the neuro-whip to make me work on the tapes in the library. So I haven’t seen much of Mandanar. But Zedward did. Zedward recognized it. He told me what he feared. Afterward I spent hour after sleepless hour scouring the endless memory systems. I found all the confirmation I needed. It all coincides—”

“What?” said Del. “Realized what? Recognized what? What coincides?”

“How much have you seen?” Shevan held his face between her hands and stared down into his scared eyes. Del shook his head. Shevan said, “We must stay here, my baby giant, until the sun goes out and extinguishes us along with it.”

“The old ones—they didn’t leave any way for us? After all—”

Shevan’s eyes filled with tears.

“No way. No way because none of them found the way either. Even Keren saw it in the end. The structure of the city, the skeletons in suits, almost all wearing helmets, the windowless spokes, the control centers. It seems they were all aboard. Perhaps they were even in countdown when the scourge struck them. Mandanar is a huge space vehicle, Del. A secret the Superom carefully guarded from the Thetans. It never left Thetis. It is a mausoleum now, a cenotaph, a tomb. Nothing more.”

The immense, glacial truth of it froze Del’s thoughts. He stared at his cousin: the beautiful but haggard woman who had begun the journey as a child. He tried to shake his head, but her eyes denied him even that brief consolation.

“Perhaps it’ll last. Perhaps it won’t go out, Shevan. The sun.”

“No. Even you know it now.”

“Keren? What—”

“Keren is afraid. He’s more afraid now than ever. If the Thetans learn that the Superom can never return, what reason would they have for acknowledging Keren—or you or I or the shell of Karel kept alive six hundred years to no purpose?”

“I can’t believe—I can’t believe it, Shev. Everything! All we’ve done—”

“Our cousin pins his hopes on Karel. He spent all his time guarding him in the tower at Spadrox. He needed for Karel to stay asleep. The dormant Karel was the authority behind Keren’s rule. Keren derived his power from the casket. Now he believes his only hope is in having Karel roused. The Thetans revere the last relic of their former greatness. Our cousin thinks that he can tap the store of knowledge Karel took with him into space and brought back alone. With that Keren will hold on to power. That’s what he believes.”

“He’s crazy. We must stop him.”

“The quasi-sun will do that,” said Shevan. “Given time that will stop us all. But I fear the time between. I fear that if Keren recovers his power now he will turn to me—”

The giant stared at her with puzzled eyes.

"Until now his wives have been Thetan. The children they bore are half-bred. The Superom descendents of the survivors of the Fifth Vortex expedition had their genesis in the incubator stock from their cargo. But the incubators are dead. I am the last Superom female. Keren has it in mind—"

"No!" The word that came out of Delbet was barely recognizable. "No! You—bred with that brute—his bastard hung in you—no! Shevan—for pity! No!"

THE LAST CRY, so filled with bitterness and anguish, evoked another. Delbet and Shevan lifted startled eyes.

Keren crouched on the gallery above them. The silent doors of Mandanar had admitted him. No less astounded by the confrontation, Zedward was transfixed behind him.

"You!" Keren's snarl was little more than a whisper. His dark beard bristled as his jaw jutted forward. "The dumb giant. Betrayed again! They told me you were dead!"

"No, my cousin." Slowly Delbet drew up to full height. "I have come for Shevan."

"Masters!" The old Saivante leader's voice was as dry as fallen leaves. "Karel!"

But Keren and Delbet were too closely locked on a collision course to heed Zedward.

Keren's hand was already moving backward raggedly to his hip before the giant put bolt to slingbow. Years of hunting talues had made him swift, but the Regent had too good a start.

The neuroprobe was inaccurate at long range but the pain slammed along the giant's right arm, gnawing at every nerve. His mouth twisted into a groan. His knees buckled.

Shevan snatched the slingbow as it fell and with hasty aim leveled and fired.

Slingbow bolts were not lethal and at worst stunned and anesthetized. Her wild aim, though, caught Keren full between the eyes. The bolt could not go deep. Stopped by the bone it jutted from his brow for a second. His head flung backward and he cried out in agony. The Regent's hands groped, one for the bolt, the other for the gallery rail.

He tore the bolt free but the drug in its tip had already spread to his nervous system. His eyes glazed. He pitched forward, hung for a moment, pivoted on the rail then overbalanced. He fell to the floor below. The sharp crack as his neck broke was sickeningly loud.

Shevan screamed. Zedward leaned over the rail. His horrified eyes stared for a moment at the dead man. He looked up.

"Delbet Sir, Shevan Lady!" His old lips worked dryly for a moment. Then: "Karel! Great Karel. We did too much. The mechanisms—failing. Life going—out."

"Del!" The girl's shriek raised the giant from the floor.

"Hurry. Del!"

The giant's right arm was numb, but he used it like a club. The first blow buckled the metal table leg. The second tore it free. Blood trickled down his forearm from a gash as he wrenched the chain away, freeing Shevan.

They ran. Even the spare old Saivainte ran. He led the way as door followed collapsing door. At last they reached the revival sphere.

The six-hundred-year sleep was ending. The last of the Superom Space Elite had already begun to shrivel. The quiet anonymity of dust was waiting.

Somewhere inside the hibernation casket a last spark pulsed alive. The casket fitted immaculately into the complex mechanism of revival. On the dark rectangular screen that recorded brain activity, tiny threads of light still wandered. They were fragmented and grew weaker as the powerless observers stood and watched.

"Keren tried a last experiment," Zedward whispered hoarsely. "The revival pulses were strong, then everything collapsed."

Shevan shook her head. Her face was ashen.

On the screen the pulses had become virtually invisible.

Delbet tensed. "The signs—Shevan—look—"

A weak pulse vanished. Suddenly there was a surge.

"In the observatory!" cried Del. "Shevan! The inscription."

"Yes. Look!"

The anagrammatic pattern rallied. The shrinking past was fighting to repeat a last message before its light finally went out.

"It's the same," breathed Shevan. "The same code as the bank tapes—"

The giant was staring at the bright, trembling messages: Karel's last unspoken speech. "Zone Kappa. Deck One—"

"Code upper three, center five, lower seven, upper four, center six, lower eight. Quick, Zedward—we must record!" Shevan turned to the Saivainte. He was already scrawling the code on the hem of his cloak.

"Sun," Del intoned. "Nova Genesis—Thetis—preservation—our home—against—"

"It's going out—he's ending!" Shevan put her hands to her face. The last light fell in an arc to the lower edge of the screen and was extinguished.

WHEN it was out the survivors searched the central complex. The control zone of the great matrix which had monitored the birth and would have projected the flight of the Galactic City was clearly and logically divided. There were very few of the skeletal crew here. Those they found were of senior rank. Zone Kappa was clearly designated. Deck One was a program deck, a bank of gleaming keys.

"Yes, I understand," said Del. "I didn't know. But now I know."

"But even if the ship lifts off, Del, where will we go? Where will we finish? We're not prepared."

The giant looked at her. He shook his head.

"No," he said. "It's not that, Shevvy."

"What then?"

The giant stood in front of the deck. "Love—" he said quietly. "What they taught and what they left. Never to fail those who remain. Faithful in life. Faithful in death. To the principle. To the idea that made them walk upright and move out from the center to the farthest arms of the galaxy."

He stretched out his right hand.

"Upper three, center five, lower seven, upper four—"

"Del, darling. What is it?"

"Watch, baby," he said. "Center six, lower eight—"

All the keys were depressed.

"The message," said Del. "Left here to be activated by a pulse from a thousand light-years away if necessary, but always the one simple word."

"Del!"

"Watch!" The giant was looking for something. He found it. Suddenly on a curved screen before them appeared a huge panorama of sky and earth.

The campsite showed clear, and parts of Mandanar itself, the distant mountains, the plateau to the west. The fading artificial sun burned heat-

lessly in a clear sky. It was almost at meridian.

The giant looked again. In a few hours he had discarded his long childhood like an unwanted skin. His left hand depressed a key marked: *Stack*.

From power which had lain undiminished for six hundred years the control deck took the numbers into the computer log. *Alpha Ready* burned in green symbols.

"Yes," breathed Del. Gently but firmly he pressed *Activate*.

A short, jarring accumulation of power sped away.

Then came a great flame, a light near the orbit of the dying star and burning with the brightness of a hundred suns.

The gasps inside the tower multiplied and echoed in a great cry of awe and wonder from the gathering Thetans as the message in the sky settled into a burning orb—a new sun that already dwarfed and threatened to engulf the old one.

"Now we can begin again." Delbet turned to his cousin. "With the message they left us. I understand. I know. Do you understand, Shev?"

"In the way that women know," she said. "Inside. Before anything conscious. Before understanding."

Zedward nodded, staring with a smile of triumph at the life the old Superom had left waiting in the sky.

Shevan clung to the new Superom—the giant, the commanding creature who had come into his inheritance.

**HUE
and
CRY**



Readers write— and wrong!

Dear Mr. Jakobsson:

I am an old-time sf reader—began with Amazing in 1926, moved over to the Campbell ASF. I began reading Galaxy with the first issue in 1950. Now I have a complete file.

I have If complete also, beginning with 1962.

I read sf strictly for entertainment; not for instruction or to share a writer's world protests or to be confused or puzzled. I do occasionally enjoy a mystery or a mystifying situation, if well written and explicitly and well resolved. To leave the reader hanging may have been good for one shot long ago (The Lady or The Tiger), but imitations now are merely annoying. To leave something unsaid also used to be a way of dodging the censor—but not now surely.

With the appearance of The Gods Themselves (taking its title from one of my favorite quotes) I began to feel I should resubscribe. What decided me (with some delay) was Gene Wolfe's La Befana. That, I need not tell you, is one of the instant classics. It will be argued over, repeatedly reprinted and compared with Arthur C. Clarke's The Star.

What finally got me writing the check, however, was Bob Stickgold's Susie's Reality. The idea, of course, is not new in sf—more recently one thinks of Jerome Bixby's It's a Good

Life and the Charlie episode in Star Trek. But the chimp in this connection is a new element and the embodied flashback is highly effective.

Clifford Simak is one of my favorite authors, but Our Children's Children brings a slight shock with its resurrection of the old-fashioned BEM (beautifully drawn on pp 6-7). See our next thrilling switcheroo installment? Best wishes.

Charles F. Richter—Altadena, Calif.

Bob Stickgold and his first published piece of fiction, *Susie's Reality* (IF, June '73), have elicited more favorable reader comment than any new author *If* has been privileged to publish this year—and none, of course, worth more than an accolade from a reader of Mr. Richter's broad background. Of himself Bob writes: "A brief biography? Born in Chicago in 1945, did undergraduate work in biochemistry at Harvard, getting a bachelor's *cum laude* (almost everyone does) in three years. Then graduate work in biochemistry at University of Wisconsin, with a master's and PhD. Currently doing post-doctoral research in neurochemistry at Stanford, with eventual aims at the biochemistry of memory, learning and cognitive development (if not consciousness). That's the straight side of me. Politically, I'm working with Science for the People, a group seeking to have science work for the good of the people, rather than the good of the corporate structure. Hopefully, I would like to get into writing some relevant (viable? Ed.) science fiction, but that awaits ephemeral Time in which to work on it . . . I hate being called Mr. (or Dr.) Stickgold, so call me Bob . . ."

Thank you, Bob. —JAKOBSSON

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