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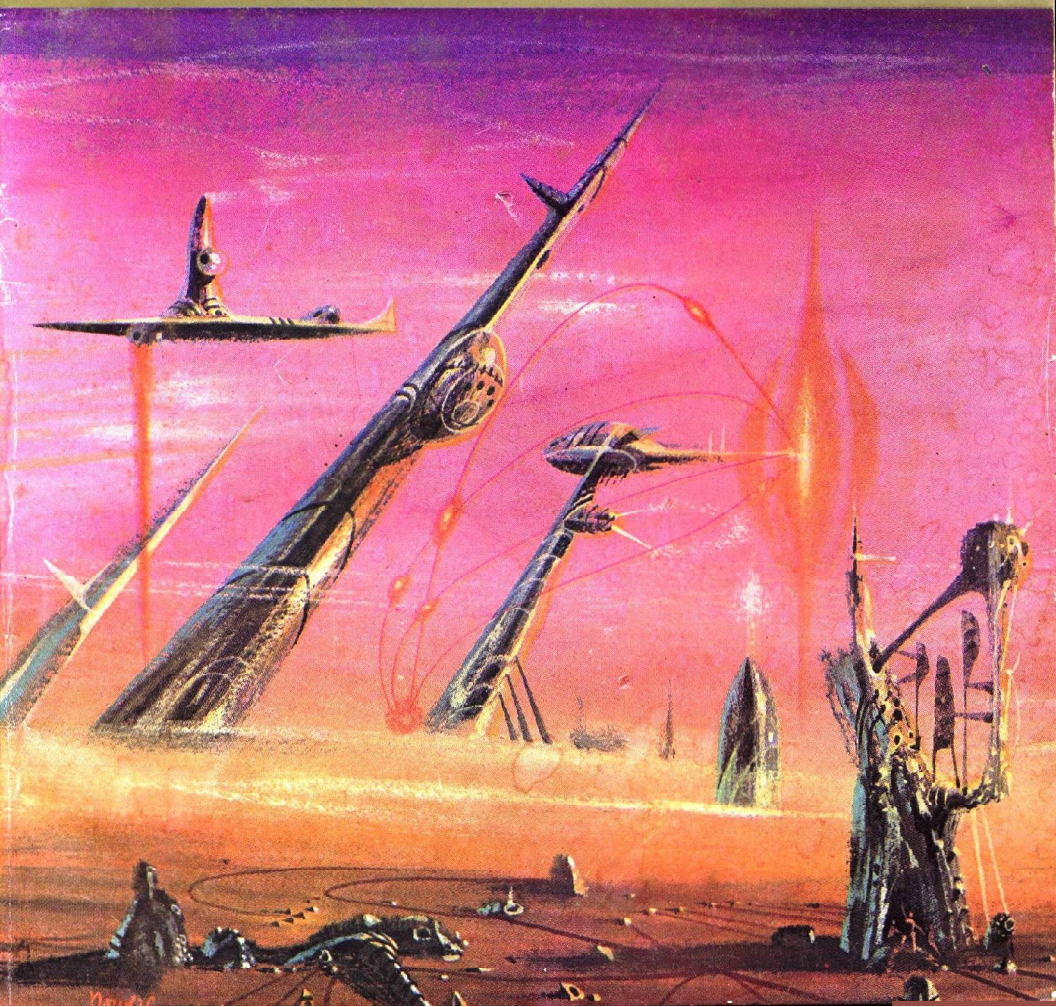

Vol. XLV, No. 2

WONDER STORIES

SCIENCE FICTION'S BEST — BY ITS FOREMOST AUTHORS

Publisher: FRANK P. LUALDI
Editor: JIM HENDRYX, JR.
General Manager: JOE JOHNSTON
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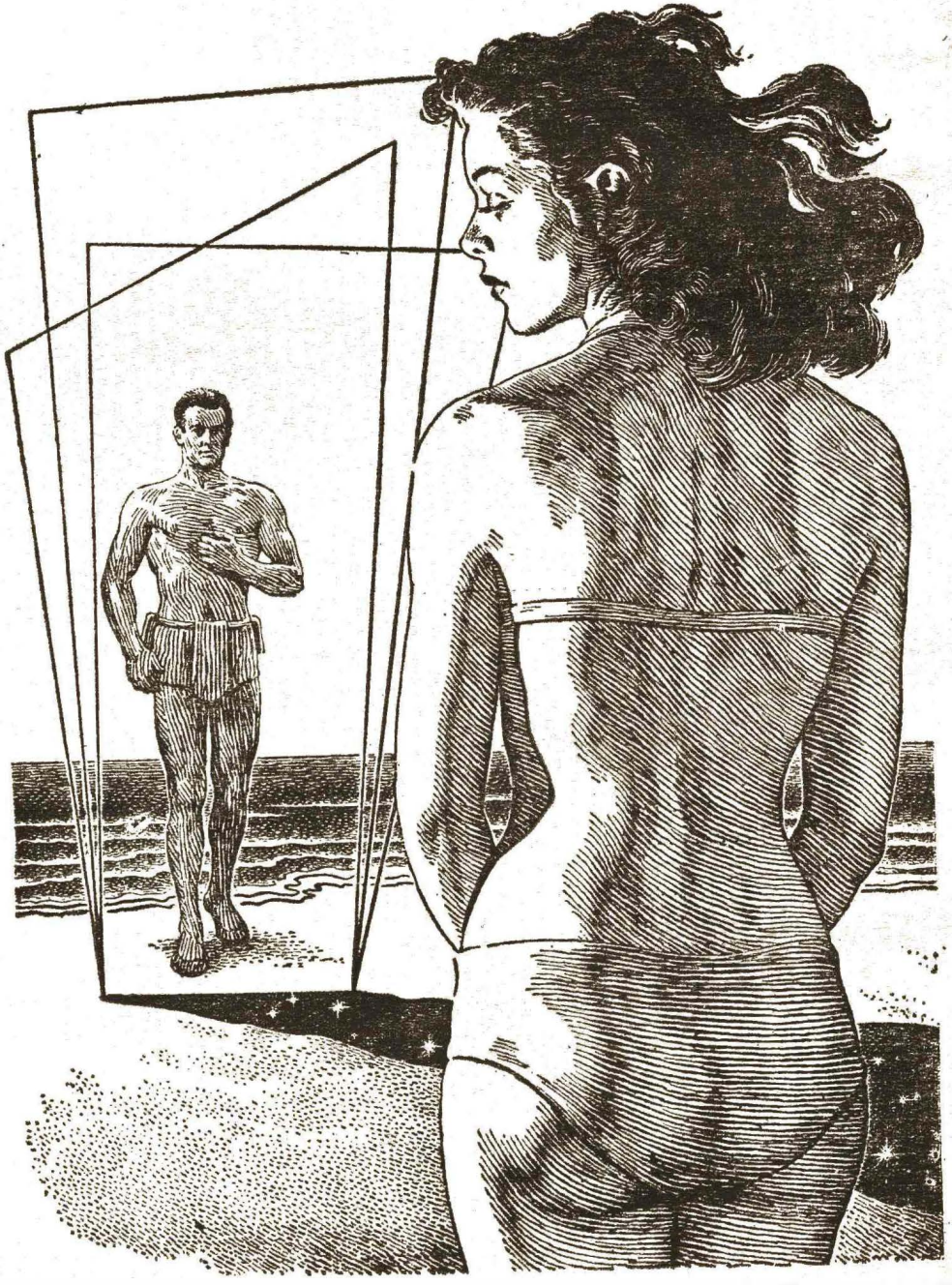
CONTENTS

A LONG NOVEL

SHORT STORIES

Published, 1963, by Popular Library, Inc. Published in U. S. A.

Wonder Stories Six. 1



SHADOW ON THE SAND

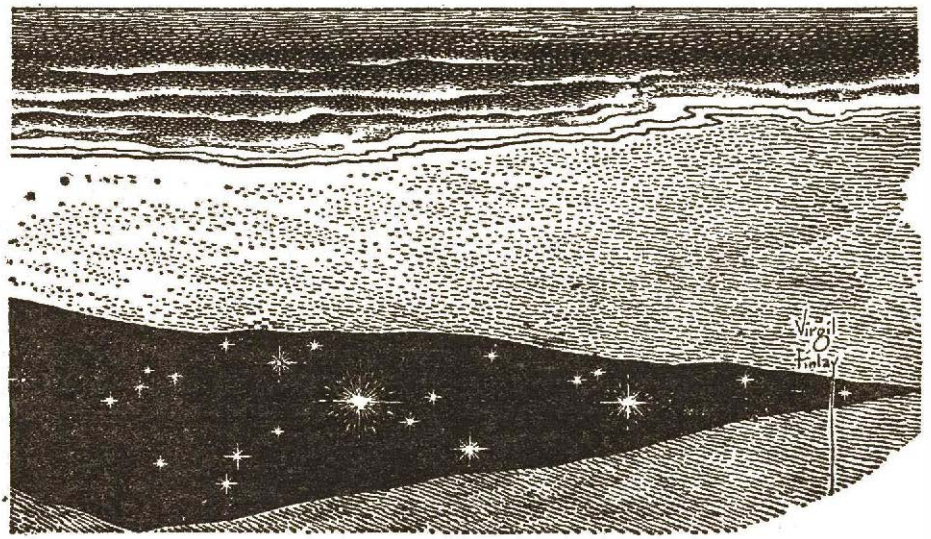
By JOHN D. MacDONALD

One of the truly great science fiction novels about aliens with the damnable power of imitating mankind

I

THEY said to Amro, "And now you will learn a new language." There was no desire in him to ask where the language was spoken and why he was to learn it. He permitted himself to speculate but one of the first rules learned by agents of the Center is that no activity is more purposeless than asking questions. All information that you must know is given to you. The proper outlet for zeal is in performance of the assigned duties. And Amro had been a Center agent for five Stradian years.

and originally published in Thrilling Wonder Stories, October, 1950



He knew that he was a good agent —one of the very best. It gave him a quiet pride to think of it. His body was good—as hard and perfect and tireless as though made of metal and leather. Other agents had been able to withstand seven and eight complete facial operations before the flesh and bone began to rebel.

Amro had been given, during his five years, fourteen separate identities and when the surgeons had last examined him they had reported no signs of tissue weariness. When no more operations could be performed it became necessary to resort to the mask-maker's art and that was never as satisfactory.

But there were more than physical requirements. More important than knowing ten silent ways to kill a man with his hands, than being an expert with knife and farris, were the emotional factors. Amro possessed an almost infinite patience, a thorough lack of imagination, straight-line logic and the ability to make a decision in the smallest fraction of a second.

As a case in point there was the affair of Morr, the almost senile member of the appropriations council. Morr was important only because he sat at council next to Strell, the man most thoroughly suspicious of the Center, the man determined to emasculate the Center through forcing a full scale investigation. Strell, being a shrewd man, had himself guarded every moment with his guard detail screened for substitutions several times each day.

The Center had picked Morr up after Amro had spent two months being prepared, fattened, softened, altered. During the two months Amro had learned to imitate to perfection Morr's every movement. As Morr, Amro sat in on eleven council meetings before the chance came. It had to be done in such a way that it would not point to the Center.

Amro did it without awakening the suspicion of the two guards who watched the murder.

As the eleventh meeting ended Amro stood up at the same moment as Strell and blundered clumsily into him. To the watchers, Strell appeared to trip and fall toward the table. His bulk screened the quick movement of Amro's arm as he grasped the front of Strell's tunic and, with savage force, pulled and guided the fall so that the bridge of Strell's nose hit the sharp table edge.

That evening the drugged Morr was given the final details. He was placed in his own chambers to awaken the next morning with a complete "memory" of all that had happened...

So now they said, "You will learn a new language."

HE WAS taken to one of the small windowless rooms where the equipment awaited him. There were a couch, a food terminal, sanitation facilities, an exercise rack. He shut the door behind him. When he was fluent in the language he would open the door. It was that simple.

He selected a spindle at random and threaded it into the instructor. Amro was pleased to hear that, unlike the pipings of the Kalla or the metallic clatterings of the Shen, this tongue would not require the use of one of the converters plus ear filters.

The spindles showed no signs of wear. He could not recall ever having heard the language spoken. He shrugged, attached the basic spindle sequence, took two of the learning acceleration tablets, stretched out on the couch and pressed the wall switch.

By the tenth day he was sufficiently fluent to request written texts. He was told that none had been prepared but that he would be given tests prepared by the people in question.

They arrived and they were most curious. He sat on the couch and handled them. In the first place they were printed on a white fragile substance which was new to him. And after many hours of intense effort, aided by captions under many pictures in the texts, he managed to identify specific words he had learned—discovering in the process that the writing was from left to right in a horizontal pattern, continuous as the white sheets were turned from right to left.

In four more days he was reading rapidly, absorbing facts on the mores, folkways, artifacts, ethics and social structure of a large and almost completely alien culture. Almost was the word to use because the aliens as shown in the pictures could just as well have been Stradians. Of course, because the other items in the pictures furnished no points of reference, they could be as tall as his little finger or three times his height, but he had the belief that they were like himself.

He was able to prove this when he found in one of the texts a measurement which he believed to be a universal constant, a table of displacements of metals. He had proven to his own satisfaction that the "gold" of which they spoke was identical to Stradian eronal. With a common starting point he was able to convert their units of linear measurement into Stradian tables and prove that they were indeed identical in height to the average Stradian.

This information caused a small germ of excitement to grow in him. Stradian statistical biologists had proved to everyone's satisfaction that the probability of identical races springing up on two planets was almost zero —identical, that is, in physical form.

The statistical psychologists had proved that any dominant high-order intelligent species, no matter what the physical form involved, will share with all other dominant species the common factors of power-hunger, ruthlessness, egocentricity and thalamic reasoning. The bitter warfare antedating the colonization of the home planets of the Kalla and the Shen were cases in point.

Thus he read with the idea of comparing similarities and dissimilarities between the men of Strada and the men of this place called Earth.

And he found that the Earthmen were weak. Weak physically in that it was a rare Earthman who could lift more than his own weight. Weak emotionally in that there were societies and organizations dedicated to the aim of stamping out "cruelty" to lesser organisms. Amro struggled with the word "cruelty" for a long time and in the end he was not completely satisfied with his own interpretation.

Their society had social weaknesses in that conflicts of ideology were permitted to be aired and voted upon by everyone, thus dragging out over many years a conflict that could have been decided in the very beginning by a few discreet assassinations. Their whole society gave him a feeling of disorderliness—of vagueness. It seemed full of cross-currents, hints, unwritten suggestions. There were many theologies but their amorphous connotations were beyond him.

In the back of one text he found maps of their world. The ratio of ocean to land was not unlike Strada—in fact he seemed to be able to detect similiarities in the continental outlines. Like Strada, Earth had polar caps and a tropical belt around the widest circumference. This appeared to refute the statistical geographers who had long since adopted as a basic concept the rule of planetary dissimilarity.

Technologically they were backward even though their dominant cultures were technistic. This did not surprise

him. On the planet itself their warring groups were separated on a "geographical" and a "linguistic" basis rather than on a social basis as on Strada. Such rigid compartmentalization would, of course, mean a serious drag on scientific advancement.

They were in the eight-minus level, apparently. Later, when he found a reference to the manufacture of radioactives, he quickly revised it to six-minus, knowing that these people were on the verge of Newtonian sublight space travel.

AT THE end of the seventeenth day he opened the door and left the room. Lofta, who had been his monitor for three years, a man grown heavy and gray in the service of the Center, saw Amro within the hour.

Amro still wore the sagging face of Morr though his body had leaned and hardened. He stood at the prescribed position until Lofta motioned him to be seated.

Amro felt the blunt thrust of Lofta's mind and there was a sudden reaction of anger. Surely by this time Lofta knew better than to violate his mental privacy as though he were dealing with a recruit!

He yielded before the probing, putting up token resistance only, then dropped all defense, accepting the pain in order to slash back, catching Lofta completely off balance. The older man grunted with the shock, recovered himself on the very verge of fainting, smiled grimly. "You grow, Amro," he said.

"I am obedient but I have pride."

Lofta sighed. "We shall not be angry with each other. What have you learned along with the language you were given?"

"Am I to describe the race?"

"Of course not! Surely you found something odd in the entire problem."

"It refutes certain accepted rules of the sciences, particularly of the statistical branches. A similar race and a similar planet should not exist."

"Nothing else?"

"No."

"Then you overlooked another seeming coincidence merely because it was too evident. Their day and night corresponds to ours and their climate. This indicates a similar rotation of the planet on its axis and a probable similar distance from their sun. If you have made conjectures about this state of affairs you may report them."

Amro frowned. "It has been proven, Lofta, that one hundred and fifty thousand of our years ago the Stradai had a greater civilization than we have now. We found evidence in the legends of the Kalla and the Shen that our remote ancestors had visited them. No one knows what happened.

"The Stradai went back to barbarianism and we have come back up the long road. Now you have given me evidence of this other civilization. I have heard of no report by the exploration cruises. Therefore the planet must be very remote. I would guess that before our previous civilization collapsed Stradai were placed on this planet.

"Granting the existence of an almost infinite number of planets it would be possible to find one, maybe, very like Strada. It could even be possible that some of the Stradai emigrated to that planet called Earth when they saw the signs of collapse here. They too lost their science, possibly from the same unknown cause. We have grown again and we have surpassed them. To think of Earth as a lost colony accounts for the unexplained similarities."

"Excellent, Amro. Excellent."

"I am right?"

"You said that the planet is very remote. We do not have a ship which can reach it."

Amro started in surprise. "The longest possible trip is six billion light years, Lofta. Beyond that point there is no way to avoid returning eventually to the starting point. Even if there were a second universe placed somehow beyond this one, it has been proven impossible to 'break through' the enfolding of space."

"I do not speak of a second universe *beyond* this one, Amro. I merely said that no ship can reach this Earth of which we speak—yet."

"Then why do I waste time with their language? You speak in riddles."

"Now you are angry again. Do I speak in riddles? We have no ship that can reach that planet, yet it is intended that you shall reach it, Amro—you and others of the Center. You may think about this.

"You are dismissed. Faven and Massio have learned the language. Others are learning. You will find them in room A-Two Hundred Thirteen point Nine. Join them there and practice this language. Within a short time we will have the subjects for substitution."

Amro went to the door. "I would like a young one."

"You are in no position to make a request."

Amro shrugged and left.

Faven and Massio were laughing when he walked in. He had once worked with Faven and their dislike was mutual. She was tall for a woman with a deep coldness and a watchfulness about her that never failed to remind him of the furred animals tamed by the Kalla. She wore the face of her last substitution, a face he had not seen before, snub-nosed and gay, with flame hair and a wide mouth. Massio he had never met. The man was younger and slighter than Amro.

Faven had a nasty trick of plunging without warning a rapier of inquiry into the minds of her equals and inferiors, a darting stinging thing, agile as quicksilver. She indulged her hates and her lusts with equal ferocity. Amro had tried and failed to root out of himself the small feeling of fear that she gave him.

She was the only thing under the sun of Strada that he did fear.

SHE introduced them in a mocking way, using the new tongue. Massio and Amro responded in kind.

"Where are we going?" Faven asked. "That seems to be the question. Lofta was selfconsciously vague." She stretched luxuriously, again reminding him of one of the furred beasts, lay back on the couch and pouted at them.

"Wherever it is it is important," Amro said. "I am no longer used on unimportant missions nor are you, Faven. And Massio, here, has been honored for the work he did on Caenia with the subsection of the Center there. To put three of us on the same mission implies that it is of the highest importance to the Center."

"Or the highest importance to the League," Faven said lazily.

"We are growing weaker," Massio said, his voice loud and heavy.

"Damn the League," Amro said. He paced restlessly. "When is this pretense of friendship going to stop? When are the agents of the Center and the agents of the League coming out from underground for honest warfare?"

"I like it the way it is," Faven said. "I like stealth and darkness. You know what will happen when it comes out in the open. We know too much. We can nova a sun, explode a planet, blast a sea into stream in a tenth of a second. What good is an individual under those circumstances? No, let us stay quietly nibbling at each other's throats. At that game I can be of some use."

"If we could strike first we could get

it over with," Amro insisted. "What if after we have won there are only a handful of planets? They'll be Center planets, won't they? Ultimate victory?"

"And if no planets are left?" Massio asked. "Just a few manned ships in the wilderness of space?"

"Then," Amro said, "those ships can find suitable planets and they will carry the seed of our science."

"You talk rot," Faven said irritably. "The Center and the League are, as far as two trillion peaceful citizens are concerned, big chummy organizations working hand in glove for the betterment of all. It was set up as a check and balance system with the League responsible for all research and scientific advances.

"When it was set up the smart ones didn't realize that the League, holding the purse strings, would try to emasculate the Center and take over little by little the research end, fattening their own pockets, turning themselves into a happy little monopoly of everything."

Massio said bitterly, "So the Center struck back by setting up secret research projects, taking over administration and government on outlying planet groups. I wonder if those peaceful citizens you speak about, Faven, ever wonder about the high mortality rate among the surface staff of the Center and the League."

"Two conflicting basic ideas of social structure cannot exist side by side," Amro said. "Either we become a useless appendage to the League, or we take over the reins the way we should. It's that simple."

"Amro, the disciple of violence," Faven said, yawning. "That idea of yours about striking first is dandy. But how? Their espionage is as good or maybe even better than ours. Four-fifths of Center agents are constantly assigned to the problem of seeing that *they* don't strike first. Do you think their forces are distributed any differently?

"Your reasoning has always been superficial, Amro. In order to strike *first,* there has to be a concentration of power and a place to strike *from.* Their surveillance makes that as impossible for us as ours makes it impractical for them. And neither side will move into the open unless they can be sure of complete surprise. Outnumbering is no good when one determined space cruiser left at large can reverse the entire war."

Massio stood up. He wore a puzzled look. "I wonder—"

"What?" Faven asked.

"Maybe this unheard-of planet could be the base, the place for a concentration of power."

The three of them were silent. Amro hit his hard thigh with a clenched fist.

"It could be exactly that!"

The excitement in them slowly dwindled as the hours went by. They practiced the new tongue for a long time and then played a word game. Massio devised in his mind a complicated sentence of ten words and then projected them, one at a time, into Amro's mind.

To receive each word Amro had to relax his guard at the moment he felt the thrust and then close his mind before Faven could catch the word. Faven could either snatch the word by thrusting at Massio's mind during the moment of sending or by entering Amro's mind during the fraction of a second of relaxation.

TO AMRO'S intense annoyance she made no attempt to wrest the word from Massio. On the third word she slipped by his guard with perfect timing, thrusting so unnecessarily deep that the pain sickened him for a moment. She did the same on the sixth and seventh word and that gave her

enough to guess the sense of the sentence. Since she had wrested the words from Amro she took his place for the next round with Massio sending again.

Amro concentrated on Faven, annoyed beyond measure as he counted the transmittal of six words, stopped each time by the rapidity with which she erected a guard against intrusion.

The seventh word slipped by. Amro suddenly jumped up and turned toward the door, his body tense. He anticipated that, for a fraction of a second, Faven would assume receptivity for whoever might be approaching the door.

He thrust back along that channel of receptivity with all his strength, smashing so far back into her mind that he reached the threshold of the instinctive level. He plucked the seven transmitted words out of her fading mind as he turned just in time to see her topple from the couch.

She recovered almost immediately and crouched there, her mouth twisting and working. "You're vile!" she said.

"It's a lesson you've been needing, Faven. And watch what you say. You won't have immunity back for several minutes. Do you understand?" He thrust along the same channel again, pushing easily by the slowly accumulating resistance, seeing her eyes lose focus, her lips pale. "I could do you serious damage," he said gently.

"I hate you," she gasped.

He grinned, resting easily within her mind, feeling the hate shadows and the pain. The will eluded him, circling like a trapped thing until he clenched it firmly. Still smiling he brought her to her feet and toward him in the jerky uncoordinated walk of the hypnotic resistance level. He forced her to drop to her knees, caress his foot and kiss the bare instep. Then he released her.

To his shocked surprise she did not move but stayed there, looking up at him. He waited for the return whiplash of her mind as her strength returned. Her eyes, however, held no glint of anger. He pushed gently and found her mind completely open and undefended, held open by her will.

He probed until he found the thought, sparkling clear, "You should have punished me long ago, Amro."

"Why?"

"No one has ever been able to discipline me before. I'll do anything you ask of me."

Ill at ease, he walked over to the food terminal, said aloud, "Do you have any particular preferences, Faven, Massio? I starve."

"Order for me," Faven said.

When he looked around she was seated on the couch, her eyes glowing. Massio acted embarrassed.

They selected the food and they ate.

II

JERRY RAYMOND, stripped down to swimming trunks, stared at the watercolor block and grunted with disgust. He sat crosslegged on a dune a hundred feet from the water's edge. He had wanted to get the effect of the afternoon light on that lonesome strip of sand and brush with the deep green water beyond it.

But how was it possible to do anything right when Fran had been gone over three hours with that supposed friend, Quinn French?

He turned and stood up, peeling the spoiled, botched watercolor off the block, staring back up the coastline to where the lighthouse at Port Isabel was a tiny projection against the deepening blue of the late afternoon sky.

His wife, Fran, had claimed that there was shopping to do. Only after Jerry had indicated that he would stay behind had Quinn French remembered

that he had some errands of his own. Three hours—more than enough time to drive into Harlingen.

He shook out the brush, picked up the cardboard box of tubes and the plastic pallet and walked slowly back to the house. It had been built long ago by a fisherman. The gray wood had writhed away from the rusted nails. Four rooms and modern inconveniences—but ample for Fran and himself.

When the company doctors had discovered that the infected skin rash had come from the new compound he had been working on, the company had authorized a six months' leave of absence with pay. It could have been the best time of their lives, he thought dourly. Sun and sand and Fran and moonlight across the quiet Gulf water, protected by the outlying reef.

He had never been completely sure of Fran. She was too lovely and too alive to be sure of. Then Quinn French had shown up. "Surprise!" he had shouted.

Fran seemed glad to see him. And two became three. They could both outswim him. Quinn French was built with enormous shoulders, honey tan slanting down across broad chest into flat belly and slim hips, then bulging out again into the convexity of thigh muscles and thick calves. His laugh was a deep boom.

Jerry Raymond was forced to admit that when he saw Fran and Quinn walking along the beach they made a spectacular couple. He wondered if Fran felt the same way. And Quinn, of course, would never have to work a day in his life. When they swam out, so far that he could barely see their heads, he knew that they swam too close together. He thought of Quinn touching her and hate made him feel faint.

Ever since the skin rash—and now it was almost gone— Fran acted a bit odd. He had sensed the restraint in her, as though he had become something distasteful to her.

Fran and Quinn were too much together. And so Jerry had eagerly agreed when Quinn had tentatively suggested asking another guest down, a girl. She would arrive from New York within the week. Jerry had seen the glint of anger in Fran's eyes when Quinn had suggested the fourth member of the party.

He stood and looked down the road, hoping to see the sun glint on the chrome of Quinn's convertible. Why were they staying away so long?

Before marriage he had never minded being alone. But now whenever Fran was away from him he felt incomplete. They had said that after a year or so of marriage some of the spice was gone. But here it was, nearly three years. And still the thought of her mouth, sun-sheen on her misty black hair, round length of thigh, insolence of breast, made him feel faint and even ill when he dwelt on them too long. Ill because somehow she never quite ceased being a stranger.

Where would they be? Side by side in the car? Or had they stopped? Had they driven down one of the sandy tracks to a secret part of the long coast? Could it be that, even as he thought of it, the two of them were... He made a small anguished sound and struck the outside wall of the house with his fist, then studied the reddened knuckles.

The yellow of the sun was taking on a reddish hue as it set behind the house. Sandpipers ran fast-legged in the gentle wash of the small waves. A gull chuckled harshly, balancing, pivoting to sweep down toward the troughs.

He went down to the sea and swam out fifty yards slowly, floating for a time on his back. Then he swam in,

harder and faster, disappointment shrill in him as he saw that the convertible was not yet parked beside his five-year-old sedan. He stood naked under the outside shower, toweled himself, dressed carefully in gray slacks and a white nylon sports shirt. He combed his dark hair carefully and studied his thin nervous face in the mirror as though it was the face of a complete stranger.

He would get in the car and look for them.

He stepped out of the house. The sun made the shadow of the house long. It stretched almost to the water's edge. There was an odd oblong projection from one edge of the shadow. It puzzled him. He went out and looked back at the house. There was nothing that would cause the irregularity.

He turned and looked at the shadow and the hair prickled on the back of his neck as he realized what was wrong with it. Instead of stretching itself flatly along the ground the way a proper shadow should, this one stood upright.

He shut his eyes hard and opened them again. Some trick of the light, some vagary of the setting sun.

Also, the color of the shadow wasn't quite *right*. As an amateur artist, Jerry Raymond had studied color. Shadows are not black. They are deep browns and purples and blues and greens. But try as he might he could see no color in this upright oblong shadow. It stood roughly eight feet tall and half that width. The edges were geometrically clear, with no fuzziness whatever.

He smiled without humor. It was like some damnable *doorway*.

QUINN FRENCH'S big hands made the steering wheel look frail. The car skittered on the edge of control on the curves. He was conscious of the woman beside him and when he had a chance he glanced over at her, taking in in that fraction of a second the new heavy-lidded look of her eyes, the complete relaxation of the way she sat, her hands loosely linked in her lap, her body slumped so that her head rested against the back of the seat.

"Too fast?" he asked.

"No, Quinn. We stayed away too long."

"Sorry?"

"Not really."

"Letting the air out of the spare was a stroke of genius, kitten. Are all women devious?"

"I don't know about all women. I only know about me."

The road curved again and flattened out. In the distance, in the clear gray dusk, they saw the house, the roof at its familiar crazy angle.

"Okay, kitten," he said. "We make merry and laugh like everything."

He bleated a fast rhythm on the horn. Shave and a haircut. He slewed into the parking space and cut the motor. She gave him one quick warm smile before getting out.

"Jerry!" they called.

He blatted the horn again. *"Jerry!* Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

"Jerry, darling!" she called.

He had left the house open. They walked a mile down the beach. No Jerry. They walked a half mile in the other direction and then it was too late to go farther. She had found the crumpled watercolor and had examined it critically.

"Not very good, eh?" he said.

"Never very good, dearest. Never. There's something cramped and little about his soul. It comes out when he tries to do this sort of thing."

It was full night. Still no Jerry. The night was cool and the driftwood burned in the hearth. He did not come back. She cooked quickly and with

competence, and they ate. He helped her clean up. When by accident their shoulders touched in the small kitchen she leaned heavily against him for a moment, turning away as he reached for her.

She had him light the other lamps, even put a Coleman lantern outside where its hard brilliance made deep shadows across the sand.

"He didn't drown," she said, "unless he went in wearing his new slacks and shirt. And Jerry is a man who would drown neatly if at all."

"It's a lonesome country back of here. Maybe he got lost."

"That doesn't sound right either. I don't understand it. If Jerry is anything he's predictable. Everything according to plan and according to schedule. Ugh!"

"Poor darling," he said softly.

She sat on the cot under the windows. He stood by the fire, his elbow on the mantel, the dead pipe in his hand. She looked at him. He slowly and carefully put the pipe on the mantel and looked at her. Slowly her head drooped as though it had become too heavy for her. He saw the swelling of her lips and he took a slow step toward her.

"No!" she said. "Not here. Please!"

But her head remained heavy and she kept looking at him. He took another step toward her.

Outside, the harsh radiance of the lantern was a dot of light on the long coast. The sea, strengthening, moved slowly against the sand. A log collapsed on the hearth and for a time the embers pulsed red.

* * *

Jerry was pulled along the corridor. He tried to set his heels. They slid on the opalescent floor. For the first few seconds there was the clear idea of being pulled along the beach and then that was lost.

"Hey!" he said. *"Hey!"*

A man pulled by his wrist can attempt to twist free. A man pushed from behind can attempt to turn away from the thrust. But he was being pulled along without being touched.

Jerry Raymond detested physical violence above all else. He treasured his dignity and his rights as a citizen. The wonder of there being this lighted corridor beyond the odd shadow was lost in the anger that he felt.

"Leave me go!" he squealed, reverting to childish spite. "Leave go!"

He tried to sit down. If he had managed it he would probably have drummed his heels on the floor and sucked his knuckles. But the pressure didn't admit of any sitting. All he could do was set his feet and slide. The man walking ahead of him was naked except for an abbreviated, lemon-yellow kilt, pouched on either side with pockets that swung as though they contained items of considerable weight.

Jerry Raymond decided to catch up with that man and grab his shoulder and swing him around. He trotted forward and found that he could not exceed his predetermined pace.

"Let me out of here," he bawled. "Hey!"

His voice was deadened by the corridor. Anger was slowly overlaid with dread. His teeth chattered and his armpits ran moisture and his legs trembled.

The inimitable journey continued. "They're going to kill me!" he screamed. That scream was directed at his personal gods, at the president of the chemical company in Gulf City, at the FBI, at Fran, at the Governor of the State and at his own mother who had been dead for over eleven years.

None of the parties so addressed heard the cry for help.

* * *

SHE leaped from deep sleep to full consciousness in one bound. Through the open doorway of the bedroom Fran Raymond saw Quinn French sprawled on the couch, heard the deep rhythm of his breathing. Even in her panic she found it possible to like the look of him.

But Jerry was not here. He had not returned. When she made certain of that fact she came back in and sat down, weak-kneed.

Quinn sat up and stretched. "He isn't back, eh?"

"No. I'm frightened, Quinn."

"And I'm starved. Come on, cookie. Start rattling pots and pans out there. And don't look. I'm going to take a fast dip."

They sat on opposite sides of the small table for breakfast. He lit two cigarettes when they had finished, handed one of them over to her.

"We've got to report it, Quinn. Maybe we should have reported it last night."

"Honey, how many people have wandered by here since you and Jerry have been living here?"

"Why—no one!"

"Are you beginning to get the idea?"

"What are you trying to say, Quinn?"

He shrugged. "Jerry wandered off. Okay. Nobody knows when, do they? So why worry? You can run in for groceries every few days and work him into the conversation. Martha won't get here for four days. Old Jerry wandered off the night before Martha arrived."

She shivered. "No. We can't do that, Quinn."

"Okay. Fill the area up with cops."

"But if he died or something and they find him they'll know that he was gone longer than that."

"There's risks to everything pleasant, honeybun."

"Quinn, I can't—"

"Sorry, baby. I guessed wrong. I thought you had nerve."

"Well—all right, Quinn. But if there's trouble you'll stand by me?"

"What did you expect?"

* * *

The horror of it was that nobody seemed to notice him. It was a table made of cool metal, so curved that his head and feet were lower than his middle. It gave him a vulnerable feeling. He could not forget the inhuman strength of the man who had placed him on the table, shoved his feet into the stirrups, his arms into the hinged tubes that now clamped them firmly from wrist to elbow.

Of course it was some kind of psychology they were using. The childish business of pretending to be too busy to pay any attention to him. After the bite of the needle in the side of his throat most of the discomfort went away. He could not roll his head from side to side. He could not even control his breathing or swallow or make a sound.

He tried to think. It was a big room. He got that impression during those violent seconds when he had been placed on the table. The equipment was strange. He could see a little of it at his left. Hinged arms like the things dentists had, only too big, of course. More psychology. Make him think that they were going to cut him up.

It would all be over as soon as he explained that he had nothing to do with the top secret work at the chemical company.

They could check easily.

He could hear them moving around. In a small mirror-like surface of one of the elbow joints almost above him he could see the fattened distorted image of his face—but nothing else.

He realized with shame that he had

acted like a child when that—that force had pulled him through the upright into the glowing corridor. Well, who wouldn't? Right on a stretch of deserted beach!

Jerry wished they'd hurry up and start the questions.

Almost as though in answer to his wish a hand reached across his face and pulled a piece of equipment forward so that it was over his face. It was a bowl-like object lined with round objects like lenses. It was lowered carefully and centered. There was a sharp metallic click from the apparatus and then it was lifted and swung back out of the way.

He grinned inside his mind. "A thing like that isn't going to bother me," he thought.

They were talking to each other, several of them. He puzzled over the sounds. The language was thick with R and L sounds, with the vowels given a guttural coughing emphasis. Not Russian—he'd heard Russian—though it might be a Russian dialect. It sounded the way he thought Arabic must sound without ever having heard any.

They adjusted something on the head of the table, on either side of him, close to his ears. The sudden blue light dazzled him. He blinked, the only voluntary physical movement left to him. In the dim backwoods of his mind a child was playing on the wooden steps of a porch in Youngstown, Ohio.

The child's impressions came to him and he realized with sudden shock that this child was himself. Yet he could not halt the progress of recall and it was almost total recall, bringing back even such details as the bars of the crib, the flaw in the windowpane, the soiled pink rabbit with the ear missing.

They were touching his head. He looked up and saw his image in the polished elbow. No, it was some sort of trick. They couldn't do that! They couldn't cut back the great flap of scalp while he was conscious. Then he felt the tiny teeth and saw the great circle of bone cut free, saw it pulled gently away, bearing the moist grayness.

Silently he screamed and screamed.

The ovoid black mass, jelly-fish slick, was fastened over the naked brain and the silver wire ran through it, winding slowly on the spindle. The fat black little machine chirped and clucked and clattered and memory went on despite his every effort to turn his mind to other things.

Panic was a thing that ran with frightened pattering feet around and around the walls of his mind. He could neither see nor feel the others who, with quick skill, flayed him quite completely, fitted his body into a rubber-like sack, tight around the throat, filled with warm circulating saline solution.

They did the head last and by that time Jerry Raymond was beyond focusing on his reflection in the mirrored surface above him. All he knew was that suddenly it was impossible for him to close his eyes.

The pump tubes were inserted in nostrils and the mouth was sealed. They removed the rubberized sack and placed him in one of the deep vats that lined the far end of the room. The liquid was dark and settled unknowing to the bottom. The shining wire emerged endlessly from the surface of the dark fluid and the pump tubes pulsed in the cadence of breathing where they entered the fluid.

Down in the unknown wetness the soul of Jerry Raymond screamed while he remembered and remembered and remembered, hearing no longer the busy chirping and clucking of the thing that sucked at his brain.

The technician pressure-hosed the skin, dried it under warm air and walked out with it over his arm. It

looked like a Halloween suit that had been made a bit too cleverly.

III

FRAN and Quinn French were stretched out on the sand in the full heat of the noon sun. Quinn's brown shoulders glistened with sweat and from time to time Fran carefully greased her long slim legs.

The sun softened and melted some of the tension and apprehension that was in her. "Martha arrives this morning," she said.

"You say that the same way you'd say the world comes to an end in the morning."

"Well—doesn't it?"

"Good girl!"

"Quinn, sometimes you sound as though you were trying to be all clipped and British. What sort of a pose is that?"

She saw the annoyance on his face as he propped himself up on one elbow. "Now we start to get critical, do we? A plan to make parting easier?"

"I just wondered why you did it," she pouted. "I'd think you'd want to know about mannerisms that make you sound—well, a little phony."

His eyes were cool as he smiled at her. "We're a couple of phonies, you and I, my love. You picture yourself as a splendid warm passionate woman, a victim of your own warmth. Wise up, honey. You're as selfish as they come."

"You're the type to end this in a dirty way, aren't you, darling."

She sat up. He reached up lazily and slapped her hard. "Keep a polite tongue in your pretty mouth, trollop."

The tears of anger squeezed out of her eyes. "You—*you*—"

He looked beyond her. His eyes widened. He said, "Get yourself in hand, Fran. Here comes trouble."

She knuckled the tears away with a quick gesture, adjusted a smile and rolled over. Jerry Raymond was coming down the beach toward them.

She jumped up quickly and ran to him, her arms outstretched, genuinely glad to see him. "Jerry! Oh, Jerry, where have you been? I've been half crazy!"

He fended her off. "Watch it, now! I don't want that grease on my shirt."

"We just didn't know," Quinn said, "whether to turn it into police business or just wait for you. I had a hunch you knew what you were doing. Now I'm glad we didn't jump the gun."

"Where did you go?"

Massio smiled at her and glanced at Quinn. The memories of Jerry had been just slightly vague as far as visualizations of form were concerned and very clear, in so far as color was involved.

He said, "Sometimes you have to be by yourself. When there are things to think over. You know how it is." He reached very cautiously toward their minds, finding the expected defenselessness, desiring not to alarm them. He read the guilt, their anger at each other. Fran's gladness to have him back, Quinn's satisfaction that it was all winding up so neatly.

"Well," Fran said, "if you want to be mysterious it's all right with me. I'm just glad to have you back. Quinn, will you mix the drinks, please. This begins to look like a happy celebration."

Massio took a deep breath of the alien air, finding it good after so long a time of being inside the Center buildings. These primitives gave him amusement. They were so tangled up in the rights and wrongs of their social customs. Emotional involvement was at such a frenetic peak.

He studied the look of the sea and sky. It could be the sky of Strada.

Fran, standing close beside him,

said softly, "Darling, wherever you went it must have done you good. You seem more relaxed—changed."

"Do I? Maybe I'm less nervous, Fran."

"Can you stay this way?"

Once again he probed a cautious bit deeper. She frowned and put the back of her hand to her forehead.

They had observed carefully, he thought. This girl was built very much like Faven. Facial alterations would not have to be extreme. And this time it could be done much more quickly because the technicians had satisfied themselves, using Jerry as a specimen, that there was no basic difference in musculature, cutaneous characteristics, nerve network.

It was just that these Earthmen had realized less of their potential and were able to utilize only a fraction of muscle power and electro-chemical neuron force. And the big one was near enough to the appearance of Amro to make it a simple substitution.

He looked along the deserted shore and felt deep excitement. This planet had *room*. And it had a peculiar availability. The League would have a sad and sudden surprise when full utilization of this planet was made.

Quinn brought back the shaker and they sat in the sand and made conversation. Massio grinned inwardly at the hate the other two felt and concealed from each other and from him. The test that the cautious Lofta had insisted on was going well. Lofta had wanted to make absolutely certain that these Earthmen had no other means of identification than the evidence of their eyes and ears.

When he was satisfied that they accepted him as Jerry Raymond without reservation Massio stood up and sent a clear mental signal to the agent technicians who waited to activate the dark doorway between two worlds.

The shadow, erect and black, sprang into being. "What the hell is that?" Quinn gasped.

MASSIO reached over, clamped Quinn by the back of the neck, lifted him and hurled him, javelin fashion, toward the doorway. Quinn landed on his feet, fell to his hands and knees. He was close enough to the shadow so that when he scrambled up he was drawn irrevocably through it, disappearing from their sight.

Fran lay there, her face greenish under the deep tan. "What are you?" she whispered.

He did not want to use hypnotic control of the sort he had seen Amro use on Faven after tricking her, because there was no way to assess the mental damage that might ensue. He picked her up and put her under his arm and walked to the doorway. She fought for a moment and then began to scream tonelessly.

"Don't put me in there, Jerry! Don't!"

"It won't hurt you."

"Jerry, *don't!* I couldn't help it. He made me do it. *Jerry!*" The last word was a rising scream, cut off abruptly as she was drawn through the shadow. It clicked off as though a power source had been cut.

Massio, using Jerry's memory, went to the house, changed to Jerry's swimming trunks and went down into the water. It felt good to stretch his muscles.

He cupped his hands and surged powerfully ahead, arching the water up to sparkle in the sunshine.

Far out, dark bodies rolled in the sunlight. He altered his course toward them, curious about them, diving down under water for the last hundred feet of approach. They were huge, four or five hundred pounds apiece, and he saw from the breathing holes on the

tops of their heads that they were mammals. As they came up to breathe, they made a rolling motion that pleased him.

They sped away from him and he moved in again, swimming parallel to their course. He saw that he could not match their top speed, but after a time they accepted him. He probed at the beast mind, found nothing but sensory satisfaction that comes from a filled belly.

He was with them when they attacked a small school of sand sharks and found in their minds the message to kill, the savage joy of killing.

When he began to tire he swam back to the shore and ran fleetly at the surf-line in thirty-foot strides.

* * *

Though the more public figures of the League managed to delude themselves into thinking that they guided the destinies of the League and made the decisions affecting basic policy, there usually came a time when they were confronted with an ultimatum from the group sometimes known as The Three.

They had no name for their small committee. They were merely three persons who worked in such obscurity that not one of each hundred underground agents of the League knew of their existence. Had there been any point in keeping records, those records would show the score of times that a policy decision by this group of three had frustrated the best laid plans of the Center. Their hate for the Center was a real emotion.

Dolpha was the oldest. He was a granite-faced man who had slowly accumulated a reputation as an administrator on the most distant planets. Then he had apparently died. A body had gone into the furnaces but it had not been Dolpha's. During the meetings, he displayed a courtly dignity, particularly to Renaen.

She was an old lady, as fragile as a cameo, with a mind like the explosive lance of a farris. Her voice and her hands trembled and only Dolpha knew that during her career as an agent, long since terminated, she had made a secret collection of the photographs of those Center officials whom she had forced to commit involuntary suicide.

That had been her specialty. The youngest member, Kama, was potentially the most powerful of the three—a lank damp-looking man with coarse hair and awkward hands who possessed one of the finest conspiratorial minds in the entire League.

"Suppose you summarize, Kama," Dolpha said.

"During the past four months, ever since the death of Strell, which we suspect but have been unable to prove, was Center work, the Center has been particularly inactive. This in itself is cause for grave alarm.

"The easiest way to analyze it is to think of what might cause us to withdraw agents from active operations, pull in our horns, so to speak, and play a waiting game. I can give two guesses. One—the development of a device or weapon superior to anything now existing. Two—the development of a secret base for existing weapons."

"Naturally," Dolpha said, "I do not like the sound of those two suppositions. Let us take the first one. A new weapon. I am sorry but I cannot conceive of any weapon more powerful than those now possessed by both sides. It has been pretty obvious for more years than I care to count that the only thing which keeps us alive, both the Center and the League, is the fact that we share the same geographical areas, thus making it unfeasible to use major weapons without suicidal implications.

"And that single fact has kept our civilization alive. Were we to separate and withdraw to allotted planets each side could very readily destroy the other. No new weapons are needed for that."

"How about a selective weapon," quavered Renaen, "that could kill League personnel without damage to Center personnel?"

Kama pursed his lips and shook his head. "No. As soon as that started to happen those of us left would release the major weapons which have no selectivity. Their thinking is clearer than that. I can see that we are face to face with the possibility of their having founded a new base.

"I have been very proud and satisfied with our system of the recording of any space-flights which could be assumed to be predominantly Center flights. During the past year not one flight has taken off for unknown areas and all arrivals have been accounted for."

Dolpha sighed. "We have never quite caught up with their science, Kama. Could they make a certain area of one planet impregnable, withdraw their key personnel to that area and then let fly?"

"Not only would we detect any such movement but I doubt that should a planet cease to exist any area would remain unaffected. Here is another point I have just thought of and believe me it does not make me feel any better. They surely know that their best method of concealment of any advantage would be to continue their regular activities. And yet they have given us cause for suspicion. That indicates their degree of confidence. Frankly I am a bit afraid. It is too bad because things had been going very well."

Dolpha said heavily, "It is unthinkable that this great race might eventually be subjected to the dictatorship of the scientific mind. We can safely assume that our civilization fell a hundred and fifty thousand years ago because men of that stamp were the leaders.

"Only in the hands of the League is the future of civilization safe. The faulty assumption was that a scientific group and an administrative group could work together. Should we be defeated each one of their petty little people will have untold power, live in palaces, grind down the populace."

"You're creating a very heavy breeze," said Renaen in her trembling voice, "and not only that, I seem to have heard a rumor that you live very well indeed, Dolpha, in that little retreat of yours."

Dolpha coughed and Kama said quickly, "I suggest that in view of their lack of activity in objective operations we take the risk of it being a trick and detach all League agents from preventative operations and assign them to objective operations. With sufficient manpower we may be able to snatch someone with key knowledge in this affair and drain his mind.

"And just in case we fail I suggest that we contact the A-list of all League personnel and advise them to ready themselves for basic flight procedure. We have statistically determined that even with maximum efficiency, one in ten on the A-list will be spaceborn in time but I feel that this is a necessary move."

"Meeting adjourned," said Dolpha. "Work out the details."

LOFTA, the monitor, was properly subdued and respectful when he entered the presence of the Chief of the Center. It was the second time in his life that he had been so honored. The Chief was a smallish man.

"All right," he said. "Sit down and report."

"The three agents have been properly substituted. They are on a deserted stretch of coastline in the company of an Earth female. I thought it best not to arrange substitution for her as yet due to the possibility of there being customs not covered by the captured texts. Though, if you will forgive me the thought, I quite fail to see the necessity for this extreme caution. We could move there in force and there is nothing that could be brought against us that—"

"You are too eager, Lofta. There will be ample time for that later. Solve one problem at a time. We have made the basic and very important discovery of a twin planetary system corresponding to our own, separated from us only by a symbolic logician's definition of reality. This is not a completely physical and technical phenomenon. It is a philosophical phenomenon.

"In simplest terms the formula can be expressed this way: The twin world exists because any definitive explanation of reality presupposes alternate realities. Thus the doorway was achieved by the creation of unreality. Call it negative matter if you will. A sphere where there is no reality must, through the application of the basic formula, be a bridge between realities. The bridge has been achieved but there is much that we don't know.

"Are we in turn available to another reality on the opposite 'side' of us? And when equipment is transported to Earth we can create once again a negative matter bridge to another reality 'beyond' their world? Also are other planets subject to this same bridging technique?

"All we can safely say is that it is a very sound assumption that our remote ancestors found this bridge and populated Earth or the converse. We have no reason to suppose that they on Earth did not have the great knowledge in their forgotten past. To get back to the point, Lofta, the very meagerness of our knowledge requires careful and cautious procedure.

"Would there be any effect on that world of the sudden elimination of this one? Can our more complicated equipment, once transposed to that world, be made to function? Have we any hope of concealing from the League a methodical emigration to that world?

"There are many things to be decided and in this connection I do not care to have to erect defenses against the people of Earth, no matter how primitive their forms of attack may be. At the moment it is sufficient to know that we have alarmed and alerted the League.

"In their anxiety they will make poor moves. We shall take advantage of those in the usual way. I anticipate that they will withdraw agents from defensive operations. We are prepared to take advantage of that."

Lofta said, "It's a new world beyond that doorway. It sometimes seems—" He stopped abruptly.

The Chief finished the sentence for him. "—seems as though we should go through the doorway and close it after us and forget our responsibilities here, heh?"

"No, I didn't mean—"

"But you did. What is there for us here? A slow building of tension until at last we blow our own heads off. Oh, we prattle about the leadership of science and the venality of the administrators in the League. All it is in essence, Lofta, is two hungry groups after the same meal only large enough for one group.

"We said, five thousand years ago, 'Reach the other planets of the system and there will be enough for all.' So we cut up the planets. Then it was, 'Reach the stars.' The distant island universes, the furthest galaxies, the discovery of an almost infinite number of habitable

planets—all that was not enough. Why, Lofta? Have you ever wondered why?"

"You're talking as though—as though there might be no point in fighting for what we believe to be right. That is treason."

"Treason, is it? To wonder why? I'm just very tired, Lofta, and a bit querulous these days. The fault is deep within us. During the periods of expansion it did not lie dormant because then space and time were the enemies to be conquered. It never lies dormant, Lofta. This is the secret of our race. There *must* be an enemy—always.

"The Kalla and the Shen were unsatisfactory. Their egocentricity was not deep enough. They admitted too quickly that there might be room in the universe for more than one race. We'll never admit that. *There must be an enemy!* And when all other dutiful enemies fail us through lack of resistance our enemy becomes our brother.

"Go now—I talk too much. Here are your orders. Move slowly. When you are certain of secrecy in that twin world I will order you to set up a technical service there and perform the necessary tests. Then we shall build the labs underground."

Lofta walked slowly to the tube, his face thoughtful. He stepped into the carrier, lay down and pressed the series of buttons for the trip pattern. The curved lid closed quickly and the carrier moved into the tube, gathering speed. The whine of the wind came quietly to his ears.

So lost was he in thought over what the Chief had said that when the carrier nudged gently to rest at the Center Agent Station of which he was monitor he became aware of his surroundings with a start of surprise.

The guards took him into the identity lab and he submitted quietly to the retinagram, body heat analysis, cerebral measurement and reflex index. Each test was graded as a series of magnetized areas on the test plate. At the lab exit the test plate was slipped along with his own permanent master plate into the grader.

The yellow light which flashed indicated no slightest degree of deviation.

Lofta went to his own office and sat with his face in his hands for quite a long time.

MARTHA KAYNAN knew that it had been a bit stupid to accept the Raymonds' invitation. She knew that she would have very little in common with them. Quinn French's phone call had come an hour after she had received the wire from Fran Raymond. Hearing Quinn's voice on the phone it was almost possible to forget that he was definitely an unwholesome type.

But the way things had been going lately—maybe the trip would do some good.

She was a small girl with brown hair that sometimes glinted red in the sunlight. Her eyes were a soft and smoky aqua and her mouth had a childish look. A careless observer might think her a quite low-pressure little girl, possibly a bit dull. But the careless observer missed the lift of the chin, the directness of the eyes, the squared shoulders, the determined walk.

There had been a series of perfectly innocuous young men who would make fine husbands—for someone else. Each idea that this might be love had melted under close scrutiny. At one time she had thought it would be Quinn French. But he turned out to be a bit easy to read. And now she accepted the invitation because the one who had looked the best of the lot had suddenly begun to bore her.

She didn't know what she wanted and the knowledge at twenty-six was beginning to disturb her. She had a small income and to supplement it she

modeled, wrote ten-cent-a-line poetry that was a shade too precious and reviewed the cinema for a quarterly which had but recently acknowledged the existence of such a medium.

Lately she had found herself taking stock too often. The inventory was always unsatisfactory. A smallish girl with a rounded and nearly perfect figure—health and fastidiousness and a knack of making light conversation. The world was full of a number of things. Why then for the past three—no, four years had everything been so absolutely and excruciatingly *dull?*

And for a time she had thought that this week on the Texas coast might be just as dull as everything else. Quinn had picked her up at the Harlingen Airport in his convertible. Aside from the fact that his driving had become considerably slower and more sane she could see no difference in him. Maybe just a tiny, tiny touch more maturity. But after all a full year had passed and even the Quinn Frenches of this world have a tendency to grow up.

When she saw Mrs. Raymond she understood a bit more of Quinn's affection for this duo. Fran Raymond was both statuesque and exotic. Her husband was dark and slight and not particularly good looking. She sensed that it was intended that her role was that of diverter of the suspicion of Jerry Raymond. So be it.

But on this second morning, as she let the sun bake her, she was conscious of being intrigued by some sort of mystery involving the Raymonds and Quinn French. They acted as though they had some enormous *secret*. And, during the first dinner at the rather pathetic little shack they called a house she had sensed that they seemed almost to be *talking* to each other without saying a word. Of course that was absurd. Maybe Quinn had known the pair of them for longer than he had let on.

And once over coffee Quinn had looked at her while she was wondering about their relationship and as he had done so an absolutely *frightful* pain had driven right through her head. It had made her gasp and for some strange reason Quinn had immediately looked quite guilty. Maybe the fool was taking up yogi or hypnotism or something.

Anyway it was damn poor hospitality, no matter how you looked at it. She couldn't help but feel that they were wishing the week was over and that Martha Kaynan would go home.

She rolled up onto one elbow and looked back up toward the house. Quinn had most uncleverly stuck the nose of the car right into a sand dune when he had driven her to the house. He was by the car. The chrome made bright glints in the sun. She shaded her eyes just in time to see Quinn reach over casually, brush the sand away from the front bumper and just as casually lift the entire front of the car and swing it over to one side and let it down.

Martha lay back on the sand quickly. She told herself that she hadn't seen any such a thing. A mirage—or the sun was affecting her mind.

When he had gone she went up quite casually and examined the tire marks. The results made her feel extremely dizzy. It was then that she heard the voices of Fran and Jerry from inside the house. They were talking together and Martha was immediately quite certain that it was some Oriental tongue.

Quinn was far down the beach. She walked rapidly after him. When she called to him he stopped and turned.

"Quinn," she said firmly. "I demand to know what this is all about."

"About? All about what?"

"I thought I knew you pretty well, Quinn. What have you been doing in the past year?"

"Nothing very unusual."

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "No? Where did you learn to make my head hurt just by staring at me? That's twice you've done it and I don't like it. It feels like a nasty hand grubbing away inside my head. And who are these friends of yours?

"I heard them talking a foreign language and it wasn't any language I ever heard before. And I saw you pick up the front end of an automobile with one hand. Quinn, I think you've been messing around with one of those nasty thought-control cults and I want to know all about it. *Immediately!*"

Amro studied the girl's face. There was something so violent and possessive about her anger that he wanted to laugh. Those eyes were a most unusual shade. They'd give the substitution crews a lot of trouble duplicating them.

"Baby, you'd better get out of this sun," he said. "It can make you imagine all sorts of things."

"The sun doesn't bother me a bit," she said.

He watched her fall, then picked her up in his arms. As he carried her into the house to put her on the couch she stirred and glared up at him.

"You did that to me, Quinn French, and don't try to deny it. There's something queer about the three of you. My great grandmother used to tell me about people who sold their souls to the devil. What have you done to yourself, Quinn?"

"Try to take a nap, Martha. You're tired. You're exhausted."

He saw the heaviness of her lids and watched her fight against it. But the fight was quickly lost. In sleep she looked more than ever like a child.

He reported the incident to Faven and Massio immediately. Faven shrugged. "Females are always more intuitive. I know Lofta wants us to keep her here. But this makes her dangerous. A little accident, maybe?"

"No," said Amro with a quick force that surprised him.

Faven cooed and touched his cheek. "So he wants a little Earthchild plaything."

"No, I merely meant that there's no harm in her. She couldn't possibly guess what we're up to or how we got here. There's no doubt in her mind but what I'm Quinn French. And by the way, there's *one* Earthling who bequeathed me a supply of very interesting memories."

FAVEN smiled. "We seem to share some of those, don't we?"

Massio said quietly, "Jerry Raymond had it in his mind to kill his wife and Quinn French. I can detect the half-formed impulse."

"I insist," Faven said, "that we get rid of that creature before she makes genuine trouble."

"You can make that suggestion to Lofta through me," Amro said stiffly. "I'll inform him of your desire when I report tonight."

Massio stretched. "I, for one, like the feeling of being able to be off-guard. It is the first time in ten years that it's been this way. The girl won't bother me. Nothing can bother me so long as I don't have to look at you two and wonder if you're League substitutions."

An hour later Martha came out onto the beach, walking unsteadily. She smiled at Quinn. "Goodness! I must have had a touch of the sun. Anyone else want a swim?"

"I do," Quinn said. They walked to the edge of the water. Martha fell heavily and lay dazed for a moment. Quinn turned and saw Faven standing by the house, an enigmatic smile on her lips.

"I—I must be sick," Martha said calmly.

"No—you're not. Swim out with me."

"You're angry. Why?"

"Be still and swim."

A hundred yards from shore he turned. In his anger he had outdistanced her by a great deal. When she came up to him her eyes were wide.

"Heavens, Quinn! How on earth do you do that? You make bow waves!"

"You fell because Fran willed you to fall. You're right. It is sort of a trick."

"Why would she do that to—oh! I see. Well, you can tell her for me that I don't want anything to do with you, Quinn French."

"Will you please listen to me? Feel that?"

"Of course," she said hotly. "And it's a dirty trick. Just like a hot needle stabbing right through my forehead."

"You don't have any resistance at all—none. But I have a hunch I can teach you through visualization. Think of something strong—a barrier."

"Like a brick wall?" Martha asked.

"Exactly. Now pretend it is right behind your eyes so that you're seeing it with the back of your eyes. Just imagine a small area of it and individualize the bricks. Identify them along with the cement between them. Make as clear a picture as you can and think of it as hard as you can."

He tried again, and felt a fractional resistance, a faint rubberiness before the probe slid through. "I could feel you push against the wall," she said, with wonder. "But you got through."

"Try again—try harder. Every brick—the pores in the bricks."

They floated in the buoyant water and slowly she acquired the necessary barrier. It was stronger each time. And finally he knew that the resistance was such that the thrust necessary to get through it would surge into her brain with such force as to permanently damage her. He explained that to her.

"Make me insane just by—whatever it is that you do? Well—if you think so, please don't try it. Now teach me how to do that to someone else, Quinn."

"You can't possibly learn it."

"You did."

"Say I had special aptitude."

"How do you know I don't?"

"I know you don't. Be glad that I've at least taught you how to keep Faven from knocking you down at will."

"Faven?"

"A pet name. I meant to say Fran."

"I hope she tries again. Have I got news for *her!*"

"Remember, you have to anticipate her attempt, otherwise it's no good. She and Jerry and I keep the shields erected at all times. It's considered to be bad taste to try to violate the privacy of someone's mind unless, of course, conditions make it such that that's the only way you can converse."

He slowed to let her catch up with him. "Then that's what you were doing the first night I was here. Say, that's only last night, isn't it? What were you talking about, Quinn?"

"Primitive women."

"Really! Are there some around?"

"Quite nearby," he said softly.

She walked ahead of him up the slope of the beach. He could not resist the impulse. She stumbled and turned back to him sharply.

"See what I mean?" he said, grinning. "You have to anticipate it, or else walk around thinking of nothing but that wall."

IV

THROUGHOUT the planets there was restlessness among the Stradai. Yet never before had society achieved such perfect balance. With a two trillion population base the increment for each year was sixteen point six billion or, based on average planet figures, a five-planet increment.

Basic decontamination squads maintained a five-year jump on the colonization, a fifteen-planet lead, with the agricultural groups and housing groups moving in a year behind them. Industrial resources were at constant full utilization to provide not only the necessary maintenance of the old but the complete supply of the new.

As the wave of population increase hit each prepared planet that planet became responsible for a fixed percentage of universal need, based on what it could best produce. To achieve this orderly result the above-ground organizations of both the Center and the League were forced to work with careful coordination, depending on the orders emanating from the home planet of Strada which over the long years had long ceased to maintain any form of heavy industry.

The entire planet was the bureaucratic nerve center of the continual expansion, a vast paperwork capital where even the smallest bureaus integrated their data on calculators half as large as the entire space occupied by bureau personnel.

A slight error on the part of Food Resources would result in deficiencies to be made up through the shift of manufacturing resources from other items. A faulty tabulation on the part of Center Research Facilities and a planet being currently occupied would lack the familiar huge white standard building common to all planets.

One area of careful cooperation was the ship facilities for the actual migrations. All planets at full population had to be constantly bled for the new ones being set up. Any delay in picking up the overage meant a strain on the facilities of the overburdened planet and a necessary diversion of cargo space to the planet to bring in the needed items from a planet with overage.

With the Center responsible for the construction and maintenance of all space carriers of the commercial type and with the League responsible for routing, it was the most closely meshed area of cooperation. The League, however, had slowly taken over the construction, operation and maintenance of the vast patrol fleet.

To counteract this potential weapon the Center had liberally interpreted its maintenance of commercial carriers responsibility and had slowly acquired a "maintenance fleet" which, though ostensibly unwarlike, matched the force of the patrol fleet.

The Stradai were born, trained to maximum efficiency in the occupation which most needed them at the time of training, were permitted to set up a family unit—monogamous or polygamous, depending on the population balance of their home planet—were given physical and mental care on the basis of periodic examinations—were provided with dwelling space and food stations—were given credits for luxury items in ratio to the performance against the predetermined efficiency index in their occupations.

The working day was five hours long as a rule, varied to fit, when necessary, a longer or shorter period of the planet. Creative art in all fields was encouraged but the majority of the Stradai preferred during their leisure hours to frequent the well-equipped recreation halls for the group games.

The new planets as they were populated became known to their inhabitants by name—Homeplace, Blue, Pleasant Home.

But to the central population records they were known by a number, the prefix being the year of preparation and the suffix being the year when full population would be reached.

At the time of the opening of the door to the twin worlds there were 562 planets, of which 486 had reached full

population, 63 were in the process of being populated and equipped and 15 were in various stages of preparation.

No man had visited them all or even half of them. Both the Center and the League were aware that the entire 562, due to patrol fleet and maintenance fleet disposition, could be completely depopulated and/or fragmented in an estimated ten-day period.

Thus the smiling adjusted hard-working Stradai of the unpolitical classes walked about with that small ice-tight kernal of fear deep in their hearts. The very ground under them was potentially unstable and the heavens could gout a white fire that would consume them within the space of a catching of the breath, an upward glance of the eyes.

ON 5980-91, one of the older planets, an elderly worker with production awards imprinted on the shoulders of his work clothes stood by the factory food station. He addressed ten other workers, the entire factory staff.

"Why aren't we told more? Where did my son go? He's been gone four years. I'll never see him again. The Center took him and he wanted excitement and he was glad to go. Have they turned him into an assassin? Why? Where do the loveliest young women of this planet go? Where are they taken? Are they taken to secret places, to be the pleasure of the big men in the League and the Center?

"What is this thing we make here? Some think it is a weapon. *I* think it is a weapon. Who is going to use it? And on whom? Why are we so carefully forced, so early in the game, to swear secret loyalty to either the Center or the League? I no longer have any loyalty to either."

The other men, white-lipped, turned uneasily away. The elderly man stood, waiting. At last, high in the wall, the brass voice of the speaker said, "Marana Seventy-nine C point One, report at once to BuPers. Report at once."

He turned and walked out. The gong sounded the end of the short rest period. The others went back to work without looking directly at each other. In the later afternoon a young worker reported and took the place of the old man.

When they reported the next morning the few personal items that the old man had kept in the work bench drawer under the bank of lights that he had watched for thirty years were gone. No one asked who had taken them. There was no need for that.

The workers in the factory felt a certain pride in being allied with the Center. After discreet and subtle questioning they found that the young worker was also one of them. Tension relaxed and within a few weeks the old man was forgotten.

* * *

The small unimportant-looking Chief of the Center maneuvered his tiny ship toward the asteroid with the ease of long practice. The asteroid was a minute million-ton chunk of black rock, selected originally because it was firm in its orbit, readily predictable, yet without motion on its own axis.

He brought his speed in relation to the asteroid to nearly zero, guided the ship slowly into the circular mouth of the tunnel, keeping it a foot from the vitrified floor. As it reached the gravitized area the prow nosed down, scraped and the small ship settled, rocking slightly before coming to rest. After he activated the port behind the ship he waited and watched the dial indicating outside air pressure creep up to normal.

Wearily he climbed out of the ship, opened the smaller port at the deep

end of the tunnel, pulled it shut behind him. Drugged with exhaustion he made his way to his bedroom, pulled off his clothes, stepped into the bath.

Here in the hollow interior of the asteroid were all of the fruits and awards his position merited, the best the culture could provide. Tart wines from the rocky hills of distant planets. Quiet, peace, luxury, service so perfect as to be barely noticeable. A million hours of music no farther away than the nearest wall selector. The golden girls of Garva or the cat-fragile women of Tsain.

He lay in the deep hot bath and the water swirled around him, washing away some of the ache, the tension.

The League knew of this place and undoubtedly knew of his arrival to the exact moment. And, knowing of it, somewhere a trained hand would rest close to a button or switch. The asteroid would make a very small puff of blue-white flame. But if that were done within one second a few dozen sybaritic retreats of League leaders would disappear in like fashion. It was a form of truce and he had come to accept it almost as a form of security.

The rush of warm air absorbed the moisture from his body. He went back into the bedroom and found that the soiled clothes had disappeared. Fresh ones were laid out for him. He knew that the servitors were awaiting his orders, that there had been a great alertness among them since the moment of his arrival.

Yet there was restlessness mingled with the weariness and he decided that for a time they should wait.

He pushed a button recessed into the top of a small table and stood back, naked, his arms crossed, watching the wide wall of the bedroom. It took on a misty look, shimmered, and was gone. As always the utter blackness was breathtaking, the stars burning with the fierce brilliance so impossible to describe to one who never left the atmospheric envelope of his home planet.

It took him but a moment to orient himself to this familiar sight. And he found Strada, not harsh like the stars but misted like the other planets, so small that even were the atmosphere gone he would have been unable to pick out the outlines of the continents.

The self-doubt which he had felt of late was new to him. Never before had he doubted his own decisions. Always he had done his work, hoping and planning and dreaming that one day there would appear a chance to break the stalemate, to win the first and last victory over the League. And now the chance had come with this doorway into another world.

Why not use it at once? Devise a clever plan of transporting vast numbers of key Center personnel into the new world. Enlarge the doorway and set up others. Turn the other world into an arsenal. Flood their heavens with ships of the Center. Then, with the first genuinely impregnable fortress that had existed for a dozen generations, issue forth to smash the League. Why not?

He knew he had lied to Lofta. There was no real reason for great slowness. There was every reason to make haste. Who could know what the League planned?

And yet—he smiled. The three agents, Amro, Massio and Faven, had reported to him in person. Amro had been their spokesman. It was the first time in his career that he had permitted direct contact with the agents. The honor had awed them. And yet through their awe he had sensed their pleasure in this new world, this quiet, primitive world.

The woman agent, Faven, had very cleverly insinuated the idea that Amro

had formed a very unnecessary emotional attachment for the Earthwoman who lived among them, not suspecting their origin. And he had seen Amro's anger, in itself a guarantee of the truth.

He looked off through space at Strada and whispered aloud, "There is the nerve center. There is the real battleground. There is the head of the beast. Neither side will quite dare to destroy it for it is the guarantee of power for both the League and the Center.

"If it were gone the chaos of mismanagement would divide the planets into the island empires—warring empires. If either the Center or the League should attempt to move away from Strada, to move the top leaders of either faction, Strada would cease to exist. Our only security is in each other's arms. Hardly an embrace of love."

The decision would have to be made and soon. There were restless lieutenants who would not hesitate at an assassination of their own Chief if they became convinced that he was becoming a burden to the Center. And indecision would start them thinking along that line.

He pushed the button again and the wall slowly took on the look of solidity. He faced the room and said softly, "Awaken me in five hours."

The substance of the bed folded up around him and the temperature of the room quickly sank to the exact degree which he preferred.

THOUGH Kama of the League had no thought for women, he had slowly and pleasantly grown quite aware of one of the four female guards who gave him the substitution check whenever he left his working area, one of the most carefully guarded of all the League installations on Strada.

For a time he was merely subconsciously aware that one of the guards smiled at him. And later he singled her out. She was not tall, quite rounded, not really pretty in any way. But Kama had a deep mistrust of beauty in any form. This one had a way of looking at him that disturbed him and set his mind working in half-forgotten patterns.

Much to his disgust he found himself thinking of her during the hours when he should have been giving all of his attention to the problem of deduction which the change in Center methods had more recently brought up.

Kama was oddly shy for all of his power as one of the most influential, though anonymous, members of The Three. And so it was another week before he brought himself to request her plate, giving then the somewhat awkward excuse that he was spot-checking defensive operations. He fitted the plate into the desk translator and the tiny magnetized areas were transformed into written information.

Her name was Maen, followed by the usual index number giving the code for the planet of birth, year of induction into the sub-rosa service of the League, intelligence rating. He found to his secret pleasure that she was assigned a small room of her own in the second sublevel under the guard station to which she was attached.

On the next day he called her by name and she flushed with pleasure. And that evening she found a chance to whisper to him her room number and a time.

Two minutes after the time she had mentioned, as Kama entered the room, she held the muzzle of the issue farris over his heart and pulled the trigger. Kama found time, even as his life exploded into nothingness, to wonder professionally how on Strada she had managed to be substituted for the genuine Maen.

She made the routine hopeless attempt to escape and the alerted guard trapped her, as was the custom, by a judicious use of the wall projectors which froze the main motor nerves. The surgeon on duty studied the exact position of the pellet imbedded by the spinal cord.

She was wheeled behind the shields and the surgeon made the usual hopeless attempt to guide the mechanical hands which performed the operation. The pellet was laid bare but as the attempt was made to deactivate it it exploded with a violence that bulged the heavy plates and stunned the surgeon.

Had he permitted her to regain the power to speak she would have exploded the pellet by saying the key word. Had he attempted a mechanical means of tapping memory the pellet would have been activated.

As was expected, no trace was discovered as to the method by which the substitution had been arranged. Her cover had been protected by a false master plate which covered the minute physiological differences that could not be duplicated. All guards, following the incident, were cross-checked so mercilessly that two of them, driven into complete mindlessness, had to be destroyed.

* * *

Martha Kaynan looked out of the window at the gray overcast day and wondered what had happened to her. This short vacation had been intended as a gap in her New York activities which of late had become quite flavorless. She had not anticipated much in the way of interest or pleasure. But there was a strange spell on this coast. The known realities had faded and there was an extreme clarity here.

Some of her self-confidence was gone. Yesterday was the day she had planned to leave. And she had sought them out, particularly Quinn, and had planned to be very firm. But she had found herself saying dubiously, "I had —planned to leave today."

And Quinn had merely said, "I think you will stay."

She had known of course that she would. And she had not questioned him. She had not even wondered how long she would stay.

They were odd, the three of them, and being near them had in some unaccountable way increased her perceptivity. Almost as though a deep racial knowledge, buried for ten thousand years, was being brought up into the light again. Sometimes she could taste their thoughts on the fringe of her mind. Not the real meaning, of course, but the emotions behind the thoughts.

Jerry Raymond seemed impatient, as though he waited for some great happening, mistrusting delay. Fran Raymond hated her. She could feel that. And Quinn seemed to be lost in some personal problem of his own, a weighing of factors. For the three of them it seemed to Martha to be a time of suspension.

And she knew that on two nights she had been drugged. She wondered why they had found it necessary to do that and she had a desperate curiosity as to what they had done while she was in drugged sleep. But oddly she could feel no resentment. It was as though the rules which pertained to these three were not the common day-by-day rules of social behavior governing the rest of mankind.

She turned quickly as Quinn came into the room. She smiled. "A day like this makes me feel like something out of Jane Eyre."

"Yes," he said but not before she had gained the clear and unmistakable impression that the name meant noth-

ing to him. There were odd gaps in Quinn's memory. Sometimes, though his speech was colloquial, without shade of accent, she had the curious feeling that English was a language he had learned to speak. And that was silly because she knew that Quinn had been born in Philadelphia.

Something tremendous had happened to Quinn during the year they had been apart. And Martha knew that she had to find out what it was or spend the rest of her life wondering. Whatever had happened it had made a deep and basic change in him. The Quinn she remembered, though selfish and sensuous and egocentric, had a certain amount of sympathetic imagination, and a touch of warmth.

The new Quinn French had a deep ice-cold ruthlessness about him as though he had been re-fashioned for use as a weapon.

He stood beside her. "What are the three of you waiting for?" she asked.

He started in surprise. "Waiting?"

"Of course you are. Don't try to lie to me, Quinn."

"It's the weather that makes you think crazy things."

"I thought this yesterday. And the sun shone all day."

HE SMILED at her but his eyes were aloof. "Why, we're waiting for the end of the world. Hadn't you heard?"

She said soberly, "Maybe you are. Maybe you are."

"A walk will do you good, Martha."

"Where are Fran and Jerry?"

"They've gone into Harlingen."

They walked down the beach. The waves were higher, thudding monotonously against the packed sand. She walked with her head bent, her hands thrust into the pockets of her tan slacks.

"What do you believe in, Quinn?" she asked. "I mean about people. I'm not asking it right. About the rights of people, of the individual?"

"The individual? What sort of an individual? An important one?"

"Why ask that?"

"An important individual is perfectly safe to exercise power in any way he wishes as long as he is able to properly protect himself."

"And the unimportant individual?"

Quinn shrugged. "The unimportant individual is unimportant and so is any discussion of his rights. He exists as a tool to be used by the important ones. If he has ability the point is to grab him early enough to give him the right mental adjustment to your own ends and then he works for you and against the others."

"And if he gets in your way?" she asked.

He looked surprised. "What can you do except kill him?"

She stopped so suddenly that he went on alone for a few paces, turned and stared back at her. "Do you believe that, Quinn?"

He frowned. "What else is there to believe?"

She stamped her foot on the sand. "I've heard that sort of talk before from some sarcastic undergraduates. But not from an adult. Look at me, Quinn."

"I'm looking."

"All right. *I* am unimportant. *I* am in your way. I'm in a position to block whatever it is that you and Fran and Jerry are planning. Do you kill me?"

"I don't understand."

"Look at me. I have the only life that I'm given to live. I have dreams and hopes—damn it, Quinn, I'm a *person.* Dead, I'm so many chemicals. Do you have the right to put an end to me? Just like that? Just because I'm unimportant?"

His smile was weak. "This is a pret-

ty alien sort of philosophy to me, Martha."

"Alien! Good heavens, it's what you've been taught all your life! What's alien about it?"

He made a long mark in the wet sand with his bare foot. "Okay, Martha. Suppose you have a society based on your ideas. The individual is important. How can that society progress? No conflicts are ever absolved. Warring groups have to fight with words."

"And in your brave society they fight with murder? Oh, brother! You've got a hole in that argument I could steer the Queen Mary through. In your society you might be okay for progress until you get a perfect balance of power between two opposed groups. Violence is your watchword. What happens? The two groups will neatly and carefully wipe each other out and your whole society in the bargain. Is that good?'

He didn't answer.

She said, "You didn't answer my question. If I should get in your way would you kill me?"

"I'd have to, wouldn't I?" he said, apparently amazed at the question.

"I think I'll take this walk alone if you don't mind," she said.

Amro stood and watched her go slowly up the beach. For years the conflict in his mind had been one of ways and means, of increasing his effectiveness with the basic concept of his position in the Center a thing beyond argument or conjecture.

Her words had the effect of attacking the foundation stones of his beliefs and it gave him a disquieting feeling of confusion. He tried to tell himself that this primitive society could not presume to teach an agent of the Center anything. The Center would win. It had to win.

But could she be right? When the conflict broke would it end everything? If it would, the very struggle itself became a struggle to see whether the Center or the League would feel strong enough to take the first step toward oblivion. And for one horrid moment he was shaken by the idea that maybe the entire conflict was pointless.

He ran after her. She stopped and regarded him coldly. "Well?"

"Martha, maybe the answer wasn't complete. I said that I would have to. But that is just a rule. Maybe, when the moment came, I'd be unable to do it."

"This," she said, "is a new high in boy meets girl. Boy declares affection by telling girl that mabe he couldn't kill her if he was supposed to. I'm touched by the depths of your affection, darling. I might test you."

"How?"

"Never mind."

He thrust toward her mind, groping for the test she had in mind, but he met the firm resistance he had not expected.

She smiled. "Maybe you shouldn't have taught me, Quinn. I'm getting better at it. Truce?" Once again there was the startling thought in her mind that the word was foreign to him.

"Yes," he said uneasily. "Truce."

"We won't fight for a time."

"Oh. Of course not."

V

THE Chief awoke from nightmare. His body was slimed with cold sweat. He felt shaken and old. The dream had not been good. They had called him and given him a long knife and sent him into the darkened room to kill. They had said, "It is your only chance for victory. It is the only way you can win."

The figure had stood defenseless in the room and with all his strength he

had swung the knife. In the instant before it struck, when it was too late to divert the stroke, the lights had become bright and he had looked into his own face. The bright steel lopped off the head, and the body, instead of falling, walked with odd dignity out the door.

The head on the floor, wearing his own face, had smiled up at him and had spoken. In the dream the words of the severed head had been the answer, the final and perfect answer which he had sought all his life. The words made the entire meaning of creation crystal clear. And the words had filled him with horror.

Now he was awake and he could not remember the words.

He bathed again and dressed. He was suddenly fiercely hungry and he stated his wants, knowing that the food he best loved was always ready, so that no matter what his choice was it would arrive within moments. To drink he requested the tart mead of Garva, made from the honey of the great insects with wingspan of ten feet.

Those who served him were the grotesques, the twisted, broken, almost mindless ones. This was a guard against any substitution in his personal staff.

The wall speaker questioned him about entertainment. "Send me what you will," he said.

It was one of the girls from Garva. She entered with becoming modesty and shyness and took one of the cushions and placed it on the floor. She sat cross-legged, a stringed instrument on her lap, and when he did not speak to her she began to sing in a low voice.

It was a ballad of her people, about a slave who had fled to the mountains and made himself king, about the delight he had created for himself in the mountain castle until at last a masked, strange woman had come to him.

She had pleased him and the king, drunk with her and with the wine had at last torn off her mask to find the white and gleaming skull of death.

"*Stop!*" he roared, striking the table with his fist.

The instrument was silent and her eyes were wide with fright. He realized that she could not have known of the dream and for a moment he felt shame.

"Sing something else," he asked gently. "Sing a love song—a gay song. And smile as you sing it. Sing it to me."

His belly full, he slouched in the chair and watched her with heavy-lidded eyes. The curve of brow ond hollow at her temple was very lovely. She was young and youth was far behind him—and he felt near at hand the death that would come. But not tonight.

The black asteroid moved in the perfect and geometric orbit around the sun that shone on the day side of Strada. The girl's voice was husky and bitter-sweet and, because her training had been thorough she would not have changed her place at the moment with any Stradian woman throughout all the light-centuries of the civilization.

"Sing again that ballad of the king," he ordered.

AMRO awakened with an abrupt feeling of alarm. He lay still for a moment, the moonlight slanting through the window and across his body. He peeled away the innermost protective layers of his mind and felt as light as the touch of insect wings, the distant flow of emotions that would grow increasingly harsh as he neared the focal point.

He padded to the door of the room. Massio lay in undisturbed sleep, not yet aware of the emotional strain in the night air that had awakened Amro. He

(Continued on page 76)

and originally appeared in Startling Stories, July 1953

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Whatever his choice, he could but lose

All the time in The WORLD

WHEN the quiet knock came on the door, Robert Ashton surveyed the room in one swift, automatic movement. Its dull respectability satisfied him and should reassure any visitor. Not that he had any reason to expect the police, but there was no point in taking chances.

"Come in," he said, pausing only to grab Plato's *Dialogues* from the shelf

beside him. Perhaps this gesture was a little too ostentatious, but it always impressed his clients.

The door opened slowly. At first, Ashton continued his intent reading, not bothering to glance up. There was the slightest acceleration of his heart, a mild and even exhilarating constriction of the chest. Of course, it couldn't possibly be a flatfoot: someone would have tipped him off. Still, any unheralded visitor was unusual and thus potentially dangerous.

Ashton laid down the book, glanced towards the door and remarked in a noncommittal voice: "What can I do for you?" He did not get up; such courtesies belonged to a past he had buried long ago. Besides, it was a woman. In the circles he now frequented, women were accustomed to receive jewels and clothes and money—but never respect.

Yet there was something about this visitor that drew him slowly to his feet. It was not merely that she was beautiful, but she had a poised and effortless authority that moved her into a different world from the flamboyant doxies he met in the normal course of business. There was a brain and a purpose behind those calm, appraising eyes—a brain, Ashton suspected, the equal of his own.

He did not know how grossly he had underestimated her.

"Mr. Ashton," she began, "let us not waste time. I know who you are and I have work for you. Here are my credentials."

She opened a large, stylish handbag and extracted a thick bundle of notes.

"You may regard this," she said. "as a sample."

Ashton caught the bundle as she tossed it carelessly towards him. It was the largest sum of money he had ever held in his life—at least a hundred fivers, all new and serially numbered. He felt them between his fingers. If they were not genuine, they were so good that the difference was of no practical importance.

He ran his thumb to and fro along the edge of the wad as if feeling a pack for a marked card, and said thoughtfully, "I'd like to know where you got these. If they aren't forgeries, they must be hot and will take some passing."

"They are genuine. A very short time ago they were in the Bank of England. But if they are no use to you throw them in the fire. I merely let you have them to show that I mean business."

"Go on." He gestured to the only seat and balanced himself on the edge of the table.

She drew a sheaf of papers from the capacious handbag and handed it across to him.

"I am prepared to pay you any sum you wish if you will secure these items and bring them to me, at a time and place to be arranged. What is more, I will guarantee that you can make the thefts with no personal danger."

ASHTON looked at the list, and sighed. The woman was mad. Still, she had better be humored. There might be more money where this came from.

"I notice," he said mildly, "that all these items are in the British Museum, and that most of them are, quite literally, priceless. By that I mean that you could neither buy nor sell them."

"I do not wish to sell them. I am a collector."

"So it seems. What are you prepared to pay for these acquisitions?"

"Name a figure."

There was a short silence. Ashton weighed the possibilities. He took a certain professional pride in his work, but there were some things that no amount of money could accomplish. Still, it would be amusing to see how high the bidding would go.

He looked at the list again.

"I think a round million would be a very reasonable figure for this lot," he said ironically.

"I fear you are not taking me very seriously. With your contacts, you should be able to dispose of these."

There was a flash of light and something sparkled through the air. Ashton caught the necklace before it hit the ground, and despite himself was unable to suppress a gasp of amazement. A fortune glittered through his fingers. The central diamond was the largest he had ever seen—it must be one of the world's most famous jewels.

His visitor seemed completely indifferent as he slipped the necklace into his pocket. Ashton was badly shaken; he knew she was not acting. To her, that fabulous gem was of no more value than a lump of sugar. This was madness on an unimaginable scale.

"Assuming that you can deliver the money," he said, "how do you imagine that it's physically possible to do what you ask? One might steal a single item from this list, but within a few hours the Museum would be solid with police."

With a fortune already in his pocket, he could afford to be frank. Besides, he was curious to learn more about his fantastic visitor.

She smiled rather sadly, as if humoring a backward child.

"If I show you the way," she said softly, "will you do it?"

"Yes—for a million."

"Have you noticed anything strange since I came in? Is it not—very quiet?"

Ashton listened. My God, she was right! This room was never completely silent, even at night. There had been a wind blowing over the rooftops; where had it gone now? The distant rumble of traffic had ceased; five minutes ago he had been cursing the engines shunting in the marshalling yard at the end of the road. What had happened to them?

"Go to the window."

He obeyed the order and drew aside the grimy lace curtains with fingers that shook slightly despite all attempt at control. Then he relaxed. The street was quite empty, as it often was at this time in the mid-morning. There was no traffic, and hence no reason for sound. Then he glanced down the row of dingy houses towards the shunting yard.

His visitor smiled as he stiffened with the shock.

"Tell me what you see, Mr. Ashton."

He turned slowly, face pale and throat muscles working.

"What are you?" he gasped. "A witch?"

"Don't be foolish. There is a simple explanation. It is not the world that has changed—but you."

Ashton stared again at that unbelievable shunting engine, the plume of steam frozen motionless above it as if made from cotton wool. He realized now that the clouds were equally immobile; they should have been scudding across the sky. All around him was the unnatural stillness of the high-speed photograph, the vivid unreality of a scene glimpsed in a flash of lightning.

"You are intelligent enough to realize what is happening, even if you cannot understand how it is done. Your time-scale has been altered: a minute in the outer world would be a year in this room."

Again she opened the handbag, and this time brought forth what appeared to be a bracelet of some silvery metal, with a series of dials and switches moulded into it.

"You can call this a personal generator," she said. "With it strapped about your arm, you are invincible. You can come and go without hindrance—you can steal everything on that list and bring it to me before one of the guards in the Museum has blinked an eyelid.

When you have finished, you can be miles away before you switch off the field and step back into the normal world.

"Now listen carefully, and do exactly what I say. The field has a radius of about seven feet, so you must keep at least that distance from any other person. Secondly, you must not switch it off again until you have completed your task and I have given you your payment. *This is most important.* Now, the plan I have worked out is this . . ."

NO CRIMINAL in the history of the world had ever possessed such power. It was intoxicating—yet Ashton wondered if he would ever get used to it. He had ceased to worry about explanations, at least until the job was done and he had collected his reward. Then, perhaps, he would get away from England and enjoy a well-earned retirement.

His visitor had left a few minutes ahead of him, but when he stepped out into the street the scene was completely unchanged. Though he had prepared for it, the sensation was still unnerving. Ashton felt an impulse to hurry, as if this condition couldn't possibly last and he had to get the job done before the gadget ran out of juice. But that, he had been assured, was impossible.

In the High Street he slowed down to look at the frozen traffic, the paralyzed pedestrians. He was careful, as he had been warned, not to approach so close to anyone that they came within his field. How ridiculous people looked when one saw them like this, robbed of such grace as movement could give, their mouths half-open in foolish grimaces!

Having to seek assistance went against the grain, but some parts of the job were too big for him to handle by himself. Besides, he could pay liberally and never notice it. The main difficulty, Ashton realized, would be to find someone who was intelligent enough not to be scared—or so stupid that he would take everything for granted. He decided to try the first possibility.

Tony Marchetti's place was down a side street so close to the police station that one felt it was really carrying camouflage too far. As he walked past the entrance, Ashton caught a glimpse of the duty sergeant at his desk and resisted a temptation to go inside to combine a little pleasure with business. That sort of thing could wait until later.

The door of Tony's opened in his face as he approached. It was such a natural occurrence in a world where nothing was normal that it was a moment before Ashton realized its implications. Had his generator failed? He glanced hastily down the street and was reassured by the frozen tableau behind him.

"Well, if it isn't Bob Ashton!" said a familiar voice. "Fancy meeting you as early in the morning as this. That's an odd bracelet you're wearing. I thought I had the only one."

"Hello, Aram," replied Ashton. "It looks as if there's a lot going on that neither of us knows about. Have you signed up Tony, or is he still free?"

"Sorry. We've a little job which will keep him busy for a while."

"Don't tell me. It's at the National Gallery or the Tate."

Aram Albenkian fingered his neat goatee. "Who told you that?" he asked.

"No one. But, after all, you *are* the crookedest art dealer in the trade, and I'm beginning to guess what's going on. Did a tall, very good-looking brunette give you that bracelet and a shopping list?"

"I don't see why I should tell you, but the answer's no. It was a man."

Ashton felt a momentary surprise. Then he shrugged his shoulders. "I

might have guessed that there would be more than one of them. I'd like to know who's behind it."

"Have you any theories?" said Albenkian guardedly.

Ashton decided that it would be worth risking some loss of information to test the other's reactions. "It's obvious they're not interested in money—they have all they want and can get more with this gadget. The woman who saw me said she was a collector. I took it as a joke, but I see now that she meant it seriously."

"Why do we come into the picture? What's to stop them doing the whole job themselves?" Albenkian asked.

"Maybe they're frightened. Or perhaps they want our—er—specialized knowledge. Some of the items on my list are rather well cased in. My theory is that they're agents for a mad millionaire."

It didn't hold water, and Ashton knew it. But he wanted to see which leaks Albenkian would try to plug.

"My dear Ashton," said the other impatiently, holding up his wrist. "How do you explain this little thing? I know nothing about science, but even I can tell it's beyond the wildest dreams of our technologies. There's only one conclusion to be drawn from that."

"Go on."

"These people are from—somewhere else. Our world is being systematically looted of its treasures. You know all this stuff you read about rockets and spaceships? Well, someone else has done it first."

Aston didn't laugh. The theory was no more fantastic than the facts.

"Whoever they are," he said, "they seem to know their way around pretty well. I wonder how many teams they've got? Perhaps the Louvre and the Prado are being reconnoitered at this very minute. The world is going to have a shock before the day's out."

They parted amicably enough, neither confiding any details or real importance about his business. For a fleeting moment Ashton thought of trying to buy over Tony, but there was no point in antagonizing Albenkian. Steven Regan would have to do. That meant walking about a mile, since of course any form of transport was impossible. He would die of old age before a bus completed the journey. Ashton was not clear what would happen if he attempted to drive a car when the field was operating, and he had been warned not to experiment.

IT ASTONISHED Ashton that even such a nearly certifiable moron as Steve could take the accelerator calmly; there was something to be said, after all, for the comic strips which were probably his only reading. After a few words of grossly simplified explanation, Steve buckled on the spare wristlet which, rather to Ashton's surprise, his visitor had handed over without comment. Then they set out on their long walk to the Museum.

Ashton, or his client, had thought of everything. They stopped once at a park bench to rest and enjoy some sandwiches and regain their breath. When at last they reached the Museum, neither felt any worse for the unaccustomed exercise.

They walked together through the gates of the Museum—unable, despite logic, to avoid speaking in whispers—and up the wide stone steps into the entrance hall. Ashton knew his way perfectly. With whimsical humor he displayed his Reading Room ticket as they walked, at a respectful distance, past the statuesque attendants. It occurred to him that the occupants of the great chamber, for the most part, looked just the same as they normally did, even without the benefit of the accelerator.

It was a straightforward but tedious job collecting the books that had been listed. They had been chosen, it seemed, for their beauty as works of art as much as their literary contents. The selection had been done by someone who knew his job. Had *they* done it themselves, Ashton wondered, or had they bribed other experts as they were bribing him? He wondered if he would ever glimpse the full ramifications of their plot.

There was a considerable amount of panel-smashing to be done, but Ashton was careful not to damage any books, even the unwanted ones. Whenever he had collected enough volumes to make a comfortable load, Steve carried them out into the courtyard and dumped them on the paving stones until a small pyramid had accumulated.

It would not matter if they were left for short periods outside the field of the accelerator. No one would notice their momentary flicker of existence in the normal world.

They were in the library for two hours of their time, and paused for another snack before passing to the next job. On the way Ashton stopped for a little private business. There was a tinkle of glass as the tiny case, standing in solitary splendor, yielded up its treasure: then the manuscript of "Alice" was safely tucked into Ashton's pocket.

Among the antiquities, he was not quite so much at home. There were a few examples to be taken from every gallery, and sometimes it was hard to see the reasons for the choice. It was as if—and again he remembered Albenkian's words—these works of art had been selected by someone with totally alien standards. This time, with a few exceptions, *they* had obviously not been guided by the experts.

For the second time in history the case of the Portland Vase was shattered. In five seconds, thought Ashton, the alarms would be going off all over the Museum and the whole building would be in an uproar. And in five seconds he could be miles away. It was an intoxicating thought, and as he worked swiftly to complete his contract he began to regret the price he had asked. Even now, it was not too late.

HE FELT the quiet satisfaction of the good workman as he watched Steve carry the great silver tray of the Mildenhall Treasure out into the courtyard and place it beside the now impressive pile. "That's the lot," he said. "I'll settle up at my place this evening. Now let's get this gadget off you."

They walked out into High Holborn and chose a secluded side street that had no pedestrians near it. Ashton unfastened the peculiar buckle and stepped back from his cohort, watching him freeze into immobility as he did so. Steve was vulnerable again, moving once more with all other men in the stream of time. But before the alarm had gone out he would have lost himself in the London crowds.

When he re-entered the Museum yard, the treasure had already gone. Standing where it had been was his visitor of—how long ago? She was still poised and graceful, but, Ashton thought, looking a little tired. He approached until their fields merged and they were no longer separated by an impassable gulf of silence. "I hope you're satisfied," he said. "How did you move the stuff so quickly?"

She touched the bracelet round her own wrist and gave a wan smile. "We have many other powers besides this."

"Then why did you need my help?"

"There were technical reasons. It was necessary to remove the objects we required from the presence of other

matter. In this way, we could gather only what we needed and not waste our limited—what shall I call them?—transporting facilities. Now may I have the bracelet back?"

Ashton slowly handed over the one he was carrying, but made no effort to unfasten his own. There might be danger in what he was doing, but he intended to retreat at the first sign of it.

"I'm prepared to reduce my fee," he said. "In fact I'll waive all payment—in exchange for this." He touched his wrist, where the intricate metal band gleamed in the sunlight.

She was watching him with an expression as fathomless as the Gioconda smile. (Had *that,* Ashton wondered, gone to join the treasure he had gathered? How much had they taken from the Louvre?)

"I would not call that reducing your fee. All the money in the world could not purchase one of those bracelets."

"Or the things I have given you."

"You are greedy, Mr. Ashton. You know that with an accelerator the entire world would be yours."

"What of that? Do you have any further interest in our planet, now you have taken what you need?"

There was a pause. Then, unexpectedly, she smiled. "So you have guessed I do not belong to your world."

"Yes. And I know that you have other agents besides myself. Do you come from Mars, or won't you tell me?"

"I am quite willing to tell you. But you may not thank me if I do."

ASHTON looked at her warily. What did she mean by that? Unconscious of his action, he put his wrist behind his back, protecting the bracelet.

"No, I am not from Mars, or any planet of which you have ever heard. You would not understand *what* I am. Yet I will tell you this. I am from the Future."

"The Future! That's ridiculous!"

"Indeed? I should be interested to know why."

"If that sort of thing were possible, our past history would be full of time-travelers. Besides, it would involve a *reductio ad absurdum.* Going into the past could change the present and produce all sorts of paradoxes."

"Those are good points, though not perhaps as original as you suppose. But they only refute the possibility of time-travel in general, not in the very special case which concerns us now."

"What is peculiar about it?" he asked.

"On very rare occasions, and by the release of an enormous amount of energy, it is possible to produce a—*singularity*—in time. During the fraction of a second when that singularity occurs, the past becomes accessible to the future, though only in a restricted way. We can send our minds back to you, but not our bodies."

"You mean," gasped Ashton, "that you are *borrowing* the body I see?"

"Oh, I have paid for it, as I am paying you. The owner has agreed to the terms. We are very conscientious in these matters."

Ashton was thinking swiftly. If this story was true, it gave him a definite advantage.

"You mean," he continued, "that you have no direct control over matter, and must work through human agents?"

"Yes. Even those bracelets were made here, under our mental control."

She was explaining too much too readily, revealing all her weaknesses. A warning signal was flashing in the back of Ashton's mind, but he had

committed himself too deeply to retreat.

"Then it seems to me," he said slowly, "that you cannot force me to hand this bracelet back."

"That is perfectly true."

"That's all I want to know."

She was smiling at him now, and there was something in that smile that chilled him to the marrow.

"We are not vindictive or unkind, Mr. Ashton," she said quietly. "What I am going to do now appeals to my sense of justice. You have asked for that bracelet; you can keep it. Now I shall tell you just how useful it will be."

For a moment Ashton had a wild impulse to hand back the accelerator. She must have guessed his thoughts.

"No, it's too late. I insist that you keep it. And I can reassure you on one point. It won't wear out. It will last you—'" again that enigmatic smile—"the rest of your life.

Do you mind if we go for a walk, Mr. Ashton? I have done my work here, and would like to have a last glimpse of your world before I leave it forever."

She turned towards the iron gates, and did not wait for a reply. Consumed by curiosity, Ashton followed.

THEY walked in silence until they were standing among the frozen traffic of Tottenham Court Road. For a while she stood staring at the busy yet motionless crowds; then she sighed.

"I cannot help feeling sorry for them, and for you. I wonder what you would have made of yourselves."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Just now, Mr. Ashton, you implied that the future cannot reach back into the past, because that would alter history. A shrewd remark, but, I am afraid, irrelevant. You see, *your* world has no more history to alter."

She pointed across the road, and Ashton turned swiftly on his heels. There was nothing there except a newsboy crouching over his pile of papers. A placard formed an impossible curve in the breeze that was blowing through this motionless world. Ashton read the crudely lettered words with difficulty:

SUPER-BOMB TEST TODAY

The voice in his ears seemed to come from a very long way off.

"I told you that time-travel, even in this restricted form, requires an enormous release of energy—far more than a single bomb can liberate, Mr. Ashton. But that bomb is only a trigger—"

She pointed to the solid ground beneath their feet. "Do you know anything about your own planet? Probably not; your race has learned so little. But even your scientists have discovered that, two thousand miles down, the Earth has a dense, liquid core. That core is made of compressed matter, and it can exist in either of two stable states. Given a certain stimulus, it can change from one of those states to another, just as a see-saw can tip over at the touch of a finger. But that change, Mr. Ashton, will liberate as much energy as all the earthquakes since the beginning of your world. The oceans and continents will fly into space, the Sun will have a second asteroid belt.

"That cataclysm will send its echoes down the ages, and will open up to us a fraction of a second in your time. During that instant, we are trying to save what we can of your world's treasures. It is all that we can do; even if your motives were purely selfish and dishonest, you have done your race a service you never intended.

"And now I must return to our

(Continued on page 47)

A Sound of THUNDER

By RAY BRADBURY

They went back sixty million years —and warped the path of history

THE sign on the office wall read:

TIME SAFARI, INC.
SAFARIS TO ANY YEAR IN THE PAST
YOU NAME THE ANIMAL
WE TAKE YOU THERE
YOU SHOOT IT

Mr. Eckels smiled nervously and handed a check for ten thousand dollars to

the man behind the desk.

"Does this safari guarantee I come back alive?"

"We guarantee nothing," said the official, "except the dinosaurs." He turned. "This is Mr. Travis, your Safari Guide in the Past. He'll tell you what and where to shoot. If he says no shooting, no shooting. If you don't follow directions, there's a stiff penalty of another ten thousand dollars, plus possible government action, on your return. I want to make you understand this clearly."

Eckels looked across the vast office at an arrangement of wires, golden boxes and an aurora that flickered like a great bonfire.

"Hell and damn," Eckels breathed, the light of the Machine on his thin face. "A real time machine." He shook his head. "Makes you think. If the election had gone badly yesterday, I might be here now running away from the results. Thank God Keith won. He'll make a fine President of the United States."

"Yes," said the man behind the desk. "We're lucky. If Lyman had gotten in, we'd have the worst kind of dictatorship. There's an anti-everything man for you—a militarist, anti-Christ, anti-human, anti-intellectual. People called us up, you know, joking but not joking. Said if Lyman got elected they wanted to go live in 1492. Of course, it's not our business to conduct escapes, but to form safaris. Anyway, Keith's President now. All you got to worry about is—"

"Shooting my dinosaur," Eckels said.

"A Tyrannosaurus rex. The damnedest monster in history. Sign this release. Anything happens to you, we're not responsible. Those dinosaurs are hungry."

Eckels flushed angrily. "Trying to scare me?"

"Frankly, yes. We don't want anyone going who'll panic at the first shot. Six safari leaders were killed last year, and a dozen hunters. We're here to give you the damnedest thrill a *real* hunter ever asked for. Taking you back sixty million years to bag the biggest damned game in all time. Your personal check's still there. Tear it up."

Mr. Eckels looked at the check for a long time. His fingers twitched.

"Good luck," said the man behind the desk. "Mr. Travis, he's all yours."

They moved silently across the room, taking their guns with them, toward the Machine, toward the silver metal and the roaring light . . .

First a day and then a night and then a day and then a night, then it was day-night-day-night-day. A week, a month, a year, a decade! 2056 A.D., 2019 A.D., 1999! 1957! Gone! The Machine roared.

They put on their oxygen helmets and tested the intercoms.

Eckels swayed on the padded seat, his face pale, his jaw stiff. He felt the trembling in his arms, and he looked down and found his hands tight on the new rifle. There were four other men in the Machine: Travis, the safari leader; his assistant, Lesperance; and two other hunters, Billings and Kramer. They sat looking at one another, and the years blazed around them.

"Can these guns get a dinosaur cold?" Eckels felt his mouth saying.

"If you hit them right," Travis said on the helmet radio. "Some dinosaurs have the equivalent of two brains, one in the head, another—a nerve plexus—far down the spinal column. We stay away from those. That's stretching luck. Put your first two shots into the eyes, if you can—blind them and go back into the brain."

THE Machine howled. Time was a film run backward. Suns fled and

ten million moons fled after them. "Good God," said Eckels. "Every hunter that ever lived would envy us today. This makes Africa seem like Illinois."

The Machine slowed; its scream fell to a murmur. The Machine stopped.

The sun stopped in the sky.

The fog that had enveloped the Machine blew away, and they were in an old time indeed, three hunters and two safari heads with their blue metal guns across their knees.

"Christ isn't born yet," said Travis. "Moses has not gone to the mountain to talk with God. The Pyramids are still in the earth, waiting to be cut out and put up. *Remember* that. Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler—none of them exists."

The men nodded.

"That," Mr. Travis said, pointing, "is the jungle of sixty million two thousand and fifty-five years before President Keith."

He indicated a metal path that wandered into green wilderness, over steaming swamp, among giant ferns and palms.

"And that," he said, "is the Path, laid by Time Safari for your use. It floats six inches above the earth. Doesn't touch so much as one grass blade, flower or tree. It's an anti-gravity metal. Its purpose is to keep you from touching this world of the past in any way. Stay on the path. Don't go off it. I repeat: *Don't go off.* For *any* reason! If you fall off, there's a penalty. And don't shoot any animal we don't okay."

"Why?" asked Eckels.

They sat in the ancient wilderness. Far birds' cries blew on a wind, and the smell of tar and an old salt sea, moist grasses and flowers the color of blood.

"We don't want to change the future. We don't belong here in the past. The government doesn't *like* us here. We have to pay big graft to keep our franchise. A time machine is damn' finicky business. Not knowing it, we might kill an important animal, a small bird, a roach, a flower, thus destroying an important link in a growing species."

"That's not clear," said Eckels.

"All right," Travis continued, "say we accidentally kill one mouse here. That means all the future families of this one particular mouse are destroyed, right?"

"Right."

TRAVIS said, "And all the families of the families of the families of that one mouse! With a stamp of your foot, you annihilate first one, then a dozen, then a thousand, a million, a *billion* possible mice!"

"So they're dead," said Eckels. "So what?"

"So what?" Travis snorted quietly. "Well, what about the foxes that'll need those mice to survive? For want of ten mice, a fox dies. For want of a fox, all manner of insects, vultures, infinite billions of life forms are thrown into chaos and destruction. Sixty million years later, a cave man, one of a dozen in the *entire world,* goes hunting wild boars or saber-toothed tigers, for food. But you, friend, have *stepped* on all tigers in that region. By stepping on *one* single mouse.

"So the cave man starves. And the cave man, please note, is not just *any* expendable man, no! He is an *entire future nation.* From his loins would have sprung ten sons. From *their* loins one hundred sons, and thus onward to a civilization. Destroy a race, a people, an entire history. It is comparable to slaying some of Adam's grandchildren. The stomp of your foot on one mouse could start an earthquake,

the effects of which could shake our destinies down through Time, to their very foundations.

"With the death of that one cave man, a billion unborn are throttled in the womb. Perhaps Rome never rises on its seven hills. Perhaps Europe is forever a dark forest. Step on a mouse and leave your print, a Grand Canyon across eternity. Washington might not cross the Delaware. There might never be a United States at all. So be careful. Stay on the Path!"

"Then," said Eckels, "it would be dangerous for us to even touch the *grass?*"

"Correct. Crushing certain plants could add up, infinitesimally. A little error here would multiply in sixty million years, all out of proportion. Of course, maybe our theory is wrong. Maybe Time *can't be* changed by us. Or maybe it can be changed only in little, subtle ways. A dead mouse here makes an insect imbalance there, a population disproportion later, a bad harvest further on, a depression, mass starvation and, finally, a change in *social* temperament in far-flung countries. Something more subtle, like that. But until we know for certain whether our messing around in Time *can* make a big or little change in history, we're being careful. This Machine, the Path, your clothing and bodies, were made sterile, as you know, before the journey. We wear these oxygen helmets so we can't introduce *our* bacteria into an ancient era."

"How do we know which animals to shoot?"

"They're marked with red paint," said Travis. "Today, before our trip, we sent Lesperance here with the Machine. He came to this particular era and followed certain animals."

"Studying them?"

"Right," said Lesperance. "I track them through their entire existence, noting which of them live long. Very few. How many times they mate. Not often. Life's short. When I find one that's going to die when a tree falls on him, or one that drowns in a tar pit, I note the exact hour, minute and second. I shoot a paint bomb. It leaves a red patch on his hide. We can't miss it. Then I correlate our arrival in the past so that we meet the monster not more than two minutes before he would have died anyway. This way, we kill animals with no future, that are never going to mate again. You see how *careful* we are?"

"But if you came back this morning, in Time," said Eckels eagerly, "you must've bumped into *us,* our safari! How did it turn out? Was it successful? Did all of us get through—alive?"

Travis and Lesperance gave each other a look.

"That'd be a paradox," said Lesperance. "Time doesn't permit that sort of mess—a man meeting himself. When such occasions threaten, Time steps aside. Like an airplane hitting an air pocket. You felt the Machine jump just before we stopped? That was us passing ourselves on the way back to the future. We saw nothing. There's no way of telling if this expedition was a success, if we got our monster, or whether all of us—meaning *you,* Mr. Eckels—got out alive."

Eckels smiled palely.

"Cut that," said Travis, sharply. "Everyone on his feet!"

They were ready to leave the Machine.

THE jungle was high and the jungle was broad and the jungle was the entire world forever and forever. Sounds like music and sounds like flying tents filled the sky, and those were pterodactyls flying with cavernous gray wings, gigantic bats out of a delirium

and a night fever. Eckels, balanced on the narrow path, aimed his rifle playfully.

"Forbidden!" said Travis. "Don't even aim for fun. If your gun should go off—"

Eckels flushed. "Where's our Tyrannosaurus?"

Lesperance checked his wrist watch. "Up ahead. We'll bisect his trail in sixty seconds. Look for the red paint, for God's sake. Don't shoot till we give the word. Stay on the Path. *Stay on the Path!*"

They moved forward.

"Strange, murmured Eckels. Up ahead, sixty million years, Election Day over. Keith made President. Everyone celebrating. And here we are, a million years lost, and they don't exist. The things we worried about for months, a lifetime, not even born or thought about yet."

"Safety catches off, everyone!" ordered Travis. "You, first shot, Eckels. Second, Billings. Third, Kramer."

"I've hunted tiger, wild boar, buffalo, elephant, but this is *it!*" said Eckels. "I'm shaking like a kid."

"Ah!" said Travis.

Everyone stopped.

Travis raised his hand. "Ahead," he whispered. "In the mist. There he is. There's his majesty now."

The jungle was wide and full of twitterings, rustlings, murmurs and sighs. Suddenly it all ceased, as if someone had shut a door. Silence. A sound of thunder.

Out of the mist, one hundred yards away, came Tyrannosaurus rex.

"Great God," said Eckels.

"Sh!"

IT CAME on great, oiled, resilient, striding legs. It towered twenty feet above the trees, a huge evil god, folding its delicate watchmaker's claws to its oily, reptilian chest. Each lower leg was a piston, a thousand pounds of white bone sunk in thick ropes of muscle, sheathed over in a gleam of pebbled skin like the mail of a terrible warrior. Each thigh was a ton of meat, ivory and steel mesh. And from the great breathing cage of the upper body those two delicate arms dangled out front, arms with hands which might pick up and examine men like toys, while the snake neck coiled. And the head, a ton of sculptured stone itself, lifted easily upon the sky. Its mouth gaped, exposing a fence of teeth like daggers. Its eyes rolled, ostrich eggs, empty of all expression save hunger. It ran, its pelvic bones crushing aside trees and bushes, its taloned feet clawing damp earth, leaving prints six inches deep wherever it settled its weight. It ran with a gliding ballet step, far too poised and balanced for its ten tons. It moved into a sunlit arena, warily, its beautiful reptile hands feeling the air.

"My God." Eckels twisted his mouth. "It could reach up and grab the moon."

"Sh!" Travis said angrily. "He hasn't seen us yet."

"It can't be killed." Eckels pronounced this verdict quietly, as if there could be no argument. He had weighed the evidence, and this was his considered opinion. The rifle in his hands seemed a cap gun. "We were fools to come. This is impossible."

"Shut up," hissed Travis.

"Nightmare."

"Turn around," commanded Travis. "Walk quietly to the Machine. We'll remit one-half your fee."

"Didn't realize it would be this *big*," said Eckels. "Miscalculated. Now, I want out."

"It sees us!"

"There's the red paint, on its chest!"

The Tyrannosaurus raised itself. Its armored flesh glittered like a thousand

green coins. The coins, crusted with slime, steamed. In the slime, tiny insects wriggled, so that the entire body seemed to twitch and undulate, even while the monster itself did not move. It exhaled. The stink of raw flesh blew down the wilderness.

"Get me out," said Eckels. His mouth moved several times. A few words fell from his tongue. His jaw worked. "Too much. Too much. Never. Never like this before." Then he made a series of grunting sounds, as if he had been hit, very hard, in the stomach.

"Don't run," said Lesperance. "Turn around. Hide in the Machine."

"Yes," Eckels seemed to be numb. He looked at his feet, as if he were trying to make them move. He gave another helpless grunt and started out.

"Eckels!"

He took a few steps, blinking, shuffling.

"Not *that* way!"

The monster, at the first motion, lunged forward with a terrible scream. It covered one hundred yards in a few seconds. The rifles jerked up and blazed fire. A windstorm from the beast's mouth engulfed them in the stench of slime and old blood. The monster roared, teeth glittering in the sun.

ECKELS, not looking back, walked blindly to the edge of the Path, his gun limp in his arms, stepped off the Path, and walked, not knowing it, in the jungle. His feet sank into green moss. His legs moved him, and he felt alone and remote from the events behind.

The rifles cracked again. Their sound was lost in shriek and lizard thunder. The great lever of the reptile's tail swung up and lashed sideways. Trees exploded in clouds of leaf and branch. The monster twitched its jeweler's hands down to fondle at the men, to twist them in half, to crush them like berries, to cram them into its teeth and its screaming throat. Its boulder-stone eyes leveled with the men. They saw themselves mirrored. They fired at the metallic eyelids and the blazing black iris.

Like a stone idol, like a mountain avalanche, Tyrannosaurus fell. Thundering, it clutched trees, pulled them with it. It wrenched and tore the metal Path. The men flung themselves back away. The body hit, ten tons of cold flesh and stone. The guns fired. The monster lashed its armored tail, twitched its snake jaws, and lay still. A fount of blood spurted from its throat. Somewhere inside, a sac of fluids burst.

Sickening gushes drenched the hunters. They stood, red and glistening.

The thunder faded. The jungle was silent. After the avalanche, a green peace. After the nightmare, morning.

In the time machine, on his face, Eckels lay shivering. He had found his way back to the Path and climbed into the Machine.

Travis came walking, glanced at Eckels, took cotton gauze from a metal box, and returned to the others, who were sitting on the Path. "Clean up."

They wiped the blood from their helmets. The monster lay, a hill of solid flesh. Within, you could hear the sighs and murmurs as the furthest chambers of it died, the organs malfunctioning, liquids running a final instant from pocket to sac to spleen, everything shutting off, closing up forever. It was a little like standing by a steam engine at quitting time, all valves being released or levered tight. Bones cracked; the tonnage of its own flesh, off balance, dead weight, snapped the delicate forearms, caught underneath. The meat settled, quivering. Another cracking sound. Overhead, a heavy tree branch

broke from its mooring and fell. It crashed upon the dead beast with finality.

"There." Lesperance checked his watch. "Right on time. That's the tree branch that was scheduled to fall and kill this animal, originally." He glanced at the two hunters. "You want the trophy picture?"

"What?"

"We can't take a trophy back to the future. The body has to stay right here where it would have died originally; so the insects, birds and bacteria can get at it, as they were intended to. Everything in balance. The body stays. But we *can* take a picture of you standing near it."

The two men tried to think, but gave up, shaking their heads. They let themselves be led along the Path. They sank wearily into the Machine cushions. They gazed back at the ruined monster, the stagnating mound, where already strange reptilian birds and golden insects were busy at the steaming armor.

A sound on the floor of the time machine stiffened them. Eckels sat there, shivering.

"I'm sorry," he said at last.

"Get up!" cried Travis.

Eckels got up.

"Go out on that Path alone," said Travis. He had his rifle pointed. "You're not coming back in the Machine. We're leaving you here!"

Lesperance seized Travis' arm. "Wait!"

"Stay out of this!" Travis shook his hand away. "This stupid fool nearly killed us. But it isn't *that* so much. Hell, no. It's his *shoes! Look* at them! He ran off the Path. My God, that *ruins* us! Who knows how much we'll forfeit! Tens of thousands of dollars of insurance! We guarantee no one leaves the Path. He left it. Oh, the damn' fool! I'll have to report to the government. They might revoke our license to travel. God knows *what* he's done to Time, to History!"

"Take it easy. All he did was kick up some dirt."

"How do we *know?*" cried Travis. "We don't know anything! It's all a damn' mystery! Get out there, Eckels!"

Eckels fumbled with his shirt. "I'll pay anything. A hundred thousand dollars!"

Travis glared at Eckels' checkbook and spat. "Go out there. The monster's next to the Path. Stick your arms up to your elbows in his mouth. Then you can come back with us."

"That's unreasonable!"

"The monster's dead, you yellow—. The bullets! The bullets can't be left behind. They don't belong in the past—they might change something. Here's my knife. Dig them out!"

The jungle was alive again, full of the old tremors and bird cries. Eckels turned slowly to stare at the primeval garbage dump, that hill of nightmares and terror. After a long time, like a sleepwalker, he shuffled out along the Path.

He returned, shuddering, five minutes later, his arms soaked and red to the elbows. He held out his hands. Each held a number of steel bullets.

Then he fell. He lay where he fell, not moving.

"You didn't have to make him do that," said Lesperance.

"Didn't I? It's too early to tell." Travis nudged the still body. "He'll live. Next time he won't go hunting game like this. Okay." He jerked his thumb wearily at Lesperance. "Switch on. Let's go home."

1492 . . . 1776 . . . 1812.

They cleaned their hands and faces. They changed their caking shirts and pants. Eckels was up and around again, not speaking. Travis glared at him for a full ten minutes.

"Don't look at me," cried Eckels. "I haven't done anything."

"Who can tell?"

"Just ran off the Path, that's all. A little mud on my shoes— What do you want me to do—get down and pray?"

"We might need it. I'm warning you, Eckels, I might kill you yet."

"I'm innocent. I haven't done anything!"

1999...2000...2056. The Machine stopped.

The room was as they had left it. The same man sat behind the desk.

Travis looked around, suspiciously. "Everything still okay here?"

"Fine. Welcome home!"

Travis relaxed. "Okay, Eckels, get out," he said. "Don't ever come back."

Eckels didn't move.

"You heard me," said Travis, irritably. "What're you staring at?"

Eckels stared at the sign on the office wall, the same sign he had seen earlier that day. But somehow the sign had changed.

TYME SEFARI INC.
SEFARIS TU ANY YEER EN THE PAST YU NAIM THE ANIMALL.
WEE TAEK YU THAIR
YU SHOOT ITT

Eckels felt himself fall into a chair. He fumbled crazily at the thick slime on his boots. He held up a clod of dirt, trembling. "No, it *can't* be. Not a little thing like that! No!"

Embedded in the mud, glistening green and gold and black, was a butterfly, very beautiful, and very dead.

"Not a little thing like *that!* Not a butterfly!" cried Eckels.

It fell to the floor, an exquisite thing, a small thing that could upset balances and knock down a line of small dominoes and then big dominoes and then gigantic dominoes, all down the years. Eckels' mind whirled. It couldn't change things. Killing one butterfly couldn't be *that* important! *Could* it?

His face was cold. His mouth trembled, asking: "Who—who won the Presidential election yesterday?"

The man behind the desk laughed. "You joking? You know damn' well. Lyman, of course! Who else? Not that damn' weakling Keith. We got an iron man now, a man with guts!"

He paused. "What's wrong?"

Eckels moaned. He dropped to his knees. He scrabbled at the golden butterfly with shaking fingers. "Can't we," he pleaded to the world, to himself, to the officials, to the Machine, "can't we take it *back,* can't we *make* it alive again? Can't we start over! Can't we—"

He looked up into Travis' angry, frightened face. Travis shook his head.

THE END

ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD

(Continued from page 39)

ship, where it waits by the ruins of Earth almost a hundred thousand years from now. Keep the bracelet."

The withdrawal was instantaneous. The woman suddenly froze and became one with the other statues in the silent street. He was alone.

Alone! Ashton held the gleaming bracelet before his eyes, hypnotized by its intricate workmanship and by the powers it concealed. He had made a bargain, and he must keep it. He could live out the full span of his life—at the cost of an isolation no other man had ever known. If he switched off the field, the last seconds of history would tick inexorably away.

Seconds? Indeed, there was less time than that. For he knew that the bomb must already have exploded.

He sat down on the edge of the pavement and began to think. There was no need to panic. After all, he had plenty of time.

All the time in the world.

THE END

ROBERT

By EVAN HUNTER

He was a model child. In fact, he'd been made to order. . . .

THE salesman was a most presentable young man, with a grey tweed suit, and a neat brown mustache. Eddie listened to what he said, and he glanced occasionally at Mary to see if she shared his interest.

"You've got to understand," the salesman was saying, "that you aren't the first childless couple to make use of our service. As a matter of fact, I could name people in your own neighborhood who have done just what you're about to do and are—"

"We didn't say we were going to do it," Eddie reminded him.

"Of course, Mr. Stevens, I understand that. I think, however, and you'll forgive my frankness, you would be foolish *not* to do it."

Mary nodded in agreement, her brows puckered together. "You said we could choose the color of hair and eyes, is that right?"

"Exactly," the salesman smiled ingratiatingly. "A nice combination, considering your own coloring, would be

blond hair and brown eyes. That's entirely up to you, of course."

"And the complexion?" Eddie asked.

"We will match your own complexion, or give you whatever skin pigmentation you prefer. You've got to remember that we're only trying to please you. This is one of the advantages over the . . . uh . . . normal procedure. You get a choice here."

"It does sound good," Mary said.

"I don't know," Eddie said dubiously.

"It really does grow?" Mary asked the salesman. "Just like a real one?"

"That's an exclusive feature with our firm, Mr. Stevens. That's one of the reasons our model is so popular. We give it to you in a state of development comparable to the first week of life. It grows automatically, the metal treated to expand so many inches over so many years. Of course, the plastic is pliable and it stretches to accommodate the metal. The facial features change too, over the years."

"And this is all included in the initial purchase price?" Eddie asked.

"Precisely."

"How . . . how tall does it get?" Mary asked.

"That again is up to you. Most people choose six feet or so for a boy, and about five-six for a girl."

"We'd want a boy," Eddie said.

"Yes," Mary agreed.

The salesman chuckled a little and said, "Well, there's no guess work involved here. You can have a boy this time, and a girl next time, if you like."

"We want a boy," Eddie said.

"Then a boy it will be. Shall we take down the specifications?"

"Well . . ." Mary said.

"What about . . . about his character?" Eddie asked. "I mean . . ."

"That's the beautiful part of it. You get the machine with a clean mind. There are banks upon banks of memory tapes inside, all tied in with the delicate mechanism of the brain. In other words, it learns only what you want it to learn. It's a beautiful instrument, believe me. You couldn't tell it from the real thing."

"You're sure?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"About . . . about telling it from the real thing? I mean—will our neighbors know it's a robot, and not a real baby?"

The salesman laughed out loud. "Mr. Stevens, if I told you how many of your neighbors had robots instead of babies, you wouldn't believe me. It's the coming thing, take my word. Why even couples who can have children are buying our model instead. Rather than go through the mess and the uncertainty, you understand. Believe me, you won't be alone."

Eddie glanced uncertainly at Mary. She took her full lower lip between her teeth and nibbled at it. Then she nodded her head.

"All right," said Eddie.

"Fine, fine."

The salesman took a contract from his pocket and began unscrewing the lid of his fountain pen. "Now, let's see. Color of hair . . . !"

The baby was delivered as promised in less than two weeks.

It looked quite lifelike, and Eddie and Mary were very happy to have it. It didn't cry at first, but Eddie quickly corrected this, by feeding the proper information to the memory tapes. The baby learned instantly, setting up a most human howl whenever it was disturbed by anything.

"We'll have to be careful," Mary said.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, about the things we give to the memory tapes. It would look funny for the baby to be talking at six months old, don't you think?"

Eddie grinned and wiped a hand over his mouth. "Yeah. I hadn't thought of that."

"Do you think the neighbors suspect?"

"Nope."

"How do you know?"

"Well, they just didn't seem surprised, that's all."

"But I... I didn't look very... pregnant."

"I know. They still didn't seem surprised. Don't ask me. Let's let well enough alone."

Mary looked down at the still form of the baby in the crib. "Will... will it be all right, Eddie?"

"Oh, sure."

"I mean... will we get to love it? It's... it's a machine, you know."

"We'll get to love it," Eddie said solemnly.

"You really think so?"

"I really think so."

MR. JEFFRIES next door was a hell of a nice guy. At least, he was tops in Eddie's book. When he heard about the baby, he invited Eddie in and offered him a glass of port.

"There's nothing like it, Eddie," he said. "Nothing like it. You'll see. You'll love it."

"I love it already," Eddie said.

"Yes, but wait until it becomes a real person."

For a moment, Eddie's lips began to tremble. "Wh—what?"

"You know, when he begins to walk and talk and laugh. That's when you really begin enjoying 'em. Up to then, heck, they're just cute little packages, that's all."

"I guess so," Eddie said, immensely relieved.

Mr. Jeffries smiled knowingly. "What are you going to name the little rascal?" he asked.

"Robert," Eddie replied quickly.

"Robert," Mr. Jeffries echoed softly. "That's a nice name. Robert."

"My father's name," Eddie said, "Lord rest his soul."

"A very nice name," Mr. Jeffries repeated.

Eddie finished the port. "Well, I've got to get back. Mary's holding the fort all by herself."

Mr. Jeffries smiled. "It'll be easier when he grows up, Eddie. You'll see what I mean."

He hurried home to Mary.

Eddie learned one thing that worried him for a little while.

He could tell that Robert was a robot.

He didn't discover it until Robert was almost five years old. Up until that time, he thought it was an ordinary twinkle in the boy's eyes. But one day, he was sitting on the sofa reading a book when he glanced up and saw his son watching him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing, Dad. I was just thinking, that's all."

The voice coming from Robert's lips had been perfectly adjusted so that it corresponded to the chronological age of the machine. Eddie never thought of it as a machine anymore, of course. This was his son, an intelligent, warm, good-looking boy who, Eddie felt, rather favored his father.

"Thinking about what, son?"

"Oh, lots of things."

Eddie shrugged. And then he saw the flicker of light behind Robert's right eye. He stared at the boy for a moment.

"Come here, son," he said.

Robert got to his feet obediently and moved closer to his father. Eddie studied him closely. The flicker was nothing more than that: an occasional twinkle of light far behind the boy's right eye. Undoubtedly a tube, Eddie thought, and he surprised himself with

the knowledge that he still knew the boy was a robot.

"What is it, Dad?" the boy asked.

Eddie didn't want to worry him unnecessarily. He didn't want to put anything on his son's memory tapes which might upset him. "Nothing at all, my boy. Thought you had a scratch near your eye." He clapped him on the shoulder, the plastic as smooth and resilient as any living flesh. "You're as sound as a dollar. Now beat it and let me read a while."

OF COURSE they taught the boy to do only good. Recorded on Robert's memory tapes were the careful teachings of a mother and father who believed faithfully in honesty, truth, love. Nor were they worried about outside influences corrupting their son. They knew that he would only record their own teachings until they had his mechanism adjusted to accept outside offerings. They would do that when he started school. And by that time, they felt the boy's personality would be thoroughly shaped. They were quite proud of themselves, Eddie and Mary. They had raised a fine boy thus far, and they looked back on their purchase as the real beginning of their lives.

They shared their love for the boy with the entire neighborhood, boasting about him, showing him off, wearing their pride in him like a warm cloak. Mr. Jeffries, Mr. Anderson, the young Clark couple, the D'Allessios, McCarthy the cop, the tailor, the baker, everyone knew of Robert, and everyone smiled amiably whenever Robert and Eddie walked down the street.

Eddie forgot all about the twinkle behind Robert's right eye, because it was hardly noticeable anyway. He told it to Mary, but she accepted it and then forgot it, and they continued to educate the boy through his memory tapes, making him into the upright person they wanted their only son to be.

They were surprised to discover their boy had learned to do evil.

IT WAS Eddie who made the discovery. He was coming home from work, walking up the street to his small home. He nodded at Josie D'Allessio hanging out her wash, said hello to McCarthy as he swung by on his beat, waved to Mr. Jeffries next door. He came into his own front yard, closing the gate gently behind him.

"Mary?" he called. There was no answer. He shrugged and tucked his newspaper under his arm. "Robert?" This time, when he got no answer, he was slightly alarmed. Until he heard the noises coming from behind the garage. A smile expanded over his face as he recognized Robert's voice. Quietly, he put his paper down on the front stoop and tiptoed around the house.

He could hear Robert's voice more clearly now. He could hardly keep from laughing as he moved closer. And then he heard what Robert was saying.

"Kill it! Kill it! Kill the living thing!"

A shock ran up his spine, and he froze motionless, blinking his eyes. Robert was holding a frog on the ground, blood spilling from its punctured body. With a knife he'd taken from the kitchen drawer, he kept stabbing at the green and crimson mass beneath his spread fingers, intoning his hateful chant.

"Kill it! Kill the living thing!"

Eddie turned away, revulsion crawling through him like a horde of slimy insects.

He went to the bathroom and washed his hands, and then he sat down to wait for Mary. When she came home from the beauty parlor, he told her about it.

"I . . . I don't know what to do," he said. "He . . . where did he pick that up?"

"Did . . . did you scold him?"

"Scold him? No, no—of course not."

"Someone's been tampering with him," Mary said. "They've fixed his insides so that he can record outside impressions. Someone taught him that."

"Someone taught him to kill," Eddie said in a dead voice. "To kill . . . living things."

"Who?" Mary asked.

"Who?" Eddie echoed.

When Robert came in to supper that night, his hands were clean, and he bore an angelic smile on his face.

"Hello, son," Eddie said. "Where have you been hiding all day?"

Robert smiled and took his place at the table. "Down to the ball park," he said. "Few of the fellows got a game going."

Eddie's eyes opened in horror, and he looked at Mary. Mary's face almost crumpled. This was her twelve-year-old son lying.

That night they decided to do something about it.

But the questioning had to be very tactful.

They didn't want anyone to know that Robert was a robot, and yet they wanted to find out just who had fed his memory tapes such poison.

They took different sections of the neighborhood, dividing all the houses and shops between them.

Everyone was most co-operative. They answered all the questions that were put to them. No, they hadn't seen any of the neighbors behaving strangely with Robert. No, they hadn't even seen any of them alone with Robert. Why, what was it all about?

Eddie moved from house to house, from store to store. Something was troubling him. Something about the way they'd looked at him, with pity was it? Or what? Just what? He didn't pin-point it until he spoke to Mr. Jeffries next door.

"So you're worried about the boy, eh?" Mr. Jeffries asked.

"Yes. Yes, I am. I feel . . . I think someone has been corrupting him."

Mr. Jeffries chuckled. "Now, now, Eddie, that's silly."

"No," Eddie insisted. "Someone has been twisting his mind. Someone is teaching him to . . . to kill."

Mr. Jeffries opened his eyes wide, and Eddie looked deep into them.

"To kill, you say?"

"Y-yes," Eddie stammered.

Eddie kept looking into Mr. Jeffries' eyes. "To . . . to kill living things."

Mr. Jeffries laughed loudly. "Well, now, we're all living things." He paused. "Aren't we?"

Eddie turned and ran. He had seen it there, deep in Mr. Jeffries' eyes; he had seen it and he knew what it was now. He threw open the front door.

"Mary," he shouted. "Mary! Oh my God, Mary!"

His wife was sitting on the couch, her head buried in her hands. She had just returned from covering her half of the neighborhood.

"Mary," he said, "we've got to get out of here. Mr. Jeffries, the D'Allessios, the Clarks—"

"And McCarthy the cop, and the Steins, and the grocer, and—" She buried her face in her hands. "It's no use, Eddie. It's no use. We can't run away."

"The flicker," he said. "Behind the right eye. The flicker."

"Yes . . . yes." Mary's voice was broken and toneless.

"Robots," Eddie said flatly. "All robots. Every last one of them. Robots."

He fell to his knees at Mary's feet, burying his head in her lap.

Neither of them heard Robert as he came into the room with the pair of shears clutched tightly in his fist, his eyes flickering.

THE END

The Monitor

BY MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Mona was too old, they said, to know her own mind.

I WOULD die on the ship," Mona said. She held out her elderly, shaking fingers to the fire. The smoke rose in a thin vertical thread through the still night air to make a sluggish haze above her head. "Would it give you so much satisfaction, Rex, to have me die there instead of here, at home—on Earth?"

Rex's thin face burned red. "Mother!" he said bitterly, and then, controlling himself with an effort: "I suppose there's no use arguing with you. Why do you make me out a brute? Do you think I want to leave Earth? Why, I'd rather lose an arm or leg! I didn't realize until now just how hard it was going to be. You women talk so much about your feelings—do you think, because we men are less vocal, that we don't have them too?

"But we have to go. The Methwyn have found a fine new planet for us, and we couldn't get through another winter. And your idea of staying on here, all alone—it's craziness. I won't have it. You've simply got to get over it."

Mona was silent for a moment. Across the fire Helen, her daughter-in-law, was looking at her sympathetically. "I'd be all right," Mona said slowly. "You could leave me some food, and I'd pick nuts and berries. I could

live in one of the huts, and burn wood from the others."

"It—wouldn't last three months." Rex said with the brutality of exasperation. "Why are you so determined to stay, Mother? All this—" his gesture included the trees, the night, the other fires, the earth— "is over with."

"Not for me," Mona answered. "All I ever had was here on Earth.

"Rex, can't you understand how it is? You're young, you can talk about a ten-year voyage into space and not mind it. But my life's nearly over. I worked hard—"

"The Smyth tables," Rex said warmly. "Mother, you don't realize what an achievement that was. The Methwyn are helping us. They've found a refuge for us. But without your tables we couldn't even think about going into space."

"You're proud of the tables, aren't you?" Mona answered, smiling. "You've been a good son. But it doesn't seem to matter any more. It's far away from me. I worked hard, I had children. One of them, a little girl named Doris, died that year we had so little food. And you father, Rex, has been dead for nearly twenty years. All my ties are with Earth. Haven't I—haven't I earned the right to choose where I'll end my life?"

Rex's dark brows contracted savagely. "Be quiet!" he said in a shaking voice. He got up from the fire and walked away.

"He doesn't mean to be unkind," Helen said softly. "He'd stay—we all would if we could. But the Methwyn are right, Mona. If we stay here any longer, we won't have power enough for the voyage."

Mona rubbed her thin hands together. "The Methwyn." She sighed. "I can't get used to them. That's another reason why I don't want to go."

"Are you afraid of them?"

"No, not afraid. But it seems so strange, Helen, for us to be taking orders from creatures that we sent out two hundred years ago!"

"They aren't orders," Helen said quickly. "Only suggestions. We'd all be dead, Mona, if the Methwyn hadn't come back when they did. And they act only for our good. Our welfare. They keep us from making mistakes."

"I know, I know. But before we made our own mistakes."

"So many mistakes!" Helen said quizzically.

"Yes. Looking back over our history, it seems like nothing but mistakes. We fought, we suffered, we destroyed. But always we wanted something better.

"Even in our very worst mistakes, we tried.

"Now, whatever happens, whatever triumphs we have on the new planet where the Methwyn say they're taking us, they won't be *our* triumphs. Not ours. A new phase. . . ."

"A better phase," Helen said urgently. "It was planned that way, two hundred years ago. It's got to be better."

"Perhaps. It doesn't seem real to me. Now that we're leaving Earth, finally and forever, oughtn't somebody to stay? For the sake of Earth. Because of all the mistakes."

Helen got up to put another timber on the fire. Mona said, "You're going to have a child, aren't you, Helen?"

"Why . . . how did you know? It's so soon."

"From your eyes."

Helen sank down beside the fire and clasped her hands together over her knees. "Doesn't that make any difference, Mona? The baby, I mean. You'd be a grandmother."

"You'll have your own mother, dear. I want to stay. Helen, I can't tell you how much I want to stay."

"Yes. Listen. Mona. You'd better hide."

"You mean that Rex—oh, surely not. Not his own mother."

"I think he would, though. But we have to leave within the next few days, the Methwyn say. Rex won't endanger all of us to hunt for you."

"I suppose not. Thank you, Helen, for telling me."

MONA was old, and perhaps her hiding place was not well chosen. Rex found her on the second day and carried her back like a sack of wheat to the ship the Methwyn had helped to build. They passed Helen in the corridor; she looked at Mona with a shocked face. Then Rex had bundled Mona into one of the tiny cabins and was locking the door.

"You can get me for this, Mother," he said, without looking at her. "Interference with personal freedom is a serious charge. Go ahead. It won't matter. By the time I let you out, we'll be in space." She could hear his heavy, authoritative steps receding in the corridor outside.

Mona was too sensible to shout, to beat uselessly on the metal door. She lay down on the narrow bunk and tried to rest. She was achingly tired.

After ten minutes she was up again, pacing about the cabin. Two steps and two steps and two steps. Two steps about the cabin for the next ten years. But outside the whole limitless Earth was waiting like a virgin for her steps.

She couldn't bear it. She went to the shutter and tried to open it but Rex, afraid, no doubt, that seeing out would make her even more reluctant to leave, had wedged it shut. She worked at the catch until her fingers were raw, but could not open it. And this last denial seemed to her more cruel than his compulsion of her had been.

The hours passed. Mona could feel the vibration of the metal as the last fuel and supplies were taken on. The jet-off would come soon now. And in her sick longing, her hopelessness, Mona would have liked to hasten it.

A key turned slowly and softly in the lock. It was Helen, looking very white. "Hurry," she breathed, "don't make any noise, Mona. Rex will be angry. But I couldn't stand the look on your face."

She led the older woman through a passage, down a stair. They reached an exit port. Helen, fumbling uncertainly with the switches, opened it.

"We're jetting in forty minutes," she said. "But I don't think you'll be missed." She handed her food tablets.

"Thank you, Helen. . . if your child is a girl, will you name her after me?"

"Oh, yes."

The two women kissed. Helen's cheek was wet. "Goodby," she said, holding Mona's hand. "Good-by. Good luck."

"Good-by, dear."

Mona slipped through the shadows, regretting the light color of her cloak. But Helen was right, she wasn't missed. Everyone was busy with the loading, no doubt.

She reached a rise from which she could see the ship. Now that she was free of it, now that she didn't have to go, she wanted to watch the jetting off. She sat down under a pine tree, cushioned on needles. The rough bark against her back was a wonderful voluptuousness.

She was going to stay. Already, in the darkness and the silence, she could feel her heart, that had been so oppressed and confined, expand in anticipation. Time lay before her, a wealth of unspoiled days. And Earth, no longer diminished by the presence of humanity, would expand too and breathe deep in freedom and release.

THE old woman looked up at the sky. It was getting colder, in a few

days it would snow. The soft white flakes would come down out of the air —not many of them, for Earth was dry now—and Mona would catch the crystals on her hands and smile at them. Each one would be different, in the infinite beauty and delight of Earth. Each one would belong to her.

The winter would be cold, but she might weather it. It was thinkable. And if that happened, she would get to see the spring. Earth, the great dancer, moving in her whirling circuit about her lord the sun, would tip her cheek toward him again, and all the little lives of Earth would respond. There would be new leaves and forest lilies and even birds.

But even if she could not reach the spring, the winter would be wonderful. There would be smoky sunrises and red sunsets and her own footprints in the scanty snow. And each day, each moment, each breath down to the last breath of all, would be full of bliss. She would be on Earth.

"Mona," a voice behind her said unctuously, "you must go back to the ship."

Mona whirled about, her heart pounding horribly.

John, her husband, who had been dead for almost twenty years, was speaking to her.

He was badly done. He wavered and wobbled about the edges. It was natural enough.

"Oh, a Methwyn," Mona said. She spoke scornfully, but her lips were trembling. "Go away. You aren't wanted here."

The Methwyn hesitated. Then it shaped itself clumsily into a child four or five years old. Mona realized with a touch of nausea that the Methwyn was trying to project a simulacrum of Doris, the little girl she had lost so many years ago.

"Mama," the Methwyn piped shrillingly, "let's go back to the ship. You'll catch cold out here."

Mona pressed her fist to her lips. The tears of age and weakness were swimming in her eyes. Was she to be cheated after all, cheated out of the loneliness, the loveliness, the wonderful days of dying? The Methwyn was trying to persuade her, but if persuasion failed . . . with a desperate effort she controlled herself.

"Go back to the ship," she said sharply. "The others need you. You must help them. I will stay here. It is my *order* to you."

Her voice had rung out commandingly, and the Methwyn hesitated. It hesitated so long that Mona, backing away, had time to think hopefully of making a run for it. Then it shook its head, almost regretfully. The ill-made cranium bobbed about grotesquely on the babyish neck.

"I cannot allow you," it said in its bland voice. "It is not a part of the plan. To stay here would not—" it seemed to search for words and then come up with a clinching argument— "to stay here would not be *good* for you."

Mona's knees had turned to water. She could not run. A scream might have alarmed the Methwyn. She could not get a sound past the constriction in her throat.

The Methwyn scooped her up easily in its arms. Through the limber smoke of its body she caught a final swirling glimpse of trees, of sky, of earth. "It would not be good for you," the Methwyn said once more. Then it carried Mona gently back to the ship.

THE END

The Hunters

By WALT SHELDON

The Aliens invaded, conquered, killed . . . it was their way

THE SPACESHIP lay in the valley, just as reported. Lon and Jeni could see it from the ridge.

Lon finally said, "We'll keep going. We'll go further into the hills. Chara Canyon—there's a stream there."

"And when they reach Chara?"

Lon turned slowly. Her eyes were unblown tinder, smoking, not yet aflame. They wouldn't flame. That was her way, the woman's way, quiet and patient, following where he led. She was his wife. She had followed from the shining city when the bombs from space began to fall and the great black columns of smoke were monuments in the sky.

They were not alone. There were others who had fled to the great mountains, the spine of the continent, but they were scattered among the slopes and canyons.

"When they reach Chara—" Lon shrugged.

"I know, I know. I shouldn't have said that. It's too big to think about."

He thought: When it's this big the mind doesn't accept. It refuses to.

A twinkle of light down the slope caught his eye. It was only a few hundred yards below. His eyes darted in that direction, and he saw the figures moving up toward them. The light had been a reflection—the sun catching one of their strange weapons.

"Come on, Jeni!"

They started north. He glanced back once more at the thing in the valley, there on the dry plain. It was longer than a city block, projectile shaped, mirror bright. It was about what he had expected: the radio reports in the past month had described them constantly. One by one the radio reports had stopped, as the cities had fallen.

They kept to the ridge, but stayed within the tree shadows. It was cooler in the shadows. They did not run, but walked with long strides.

By looking left Lon could catch shuttered glimpses of the sky and the big round valley that stretched away to the west. He could still see the hunters once in a while, coming diagonally up the slope, as if to cut them off. Faintly, at times, he could hear their voices.

At the north end of the ridge Lon and Jeni headed downslope. The mouth of Chara Canyon, a break in the mountains to their right, was only a mile or so ahead. They heard the report of a weapon, releasing echoes that tumbled all through the hills. The report came from the ridgetop behind them, and they knew the hunters were following.

At the bottom of the slope they came to a dry stream bed. Lon jumped across, then held out his hand for Jeni. She missed. She fell, twisting her ankle.

"Oh, Lon!"

"You've got to keep going, darling—you've got to keep going!"

"Yes. I know."

HE HELPED her along, with his hand around her waist. He saw how she kept the pain from showing. She quirked her lips in a funny way each time her injured foot touched the ground, her face rigid otherwise.

He stared at that face with his usual quiet wonder. Her features were still small and delicate; still fine porcelain. There was that same compassion about her, after everything that had happened. He remembered what she had said nearly a year ago when the invading things first came out of the sky. Aircraft had lanced upward to meet them, firing . . . several of the things had been destroyed. Lon and Jeni had seen one explode over the city. It made a great orange ball in the air, smoke curling around it like shriveled skin. Jeni said: "Those poor things, those poor creatures in there . . ."

And then they had fled. They were luckier than most. Lon had worked for an aircraft plant and owned a small plane. They flew west, flying at night so the shining projectiles wouldn't find them; they begged and stole fuel and sometimes, Lon swore, they conjured it up. They crashed upon landing in the mountains, and had used parts of the plane to start their cabin.

Another shot sounded, and this time it was terribly near. He dared to turn his head. The hunters were halfway down the shoulder of the ridge. They gestured and called to each other.

"In here!" He led Jeni into a grove of white-barked trees.

Jeni's lips were tight, but a whimper forced its way through.

He held her more tightly, lifting. His heart stuttered violently. His legs ached. He stumbled, and she fell with him. They lay there, at the roots of a white-barked tree, in each other's arms, and they looked into each other's eyes and knew they couldn't go on.

They heard the shouting voices.

She said, "I don't feel anything. Funny. I'm not angry or afraid or anything."

They clung to each other suddenly. He ran his lips along her cheeks and hair with his own and he murmured things without really hearing them.

"I'm glad we're together," said Jeni.

They heard the breaking of the underbrush.

Abruptly, he stood. He faced the approaching sounds and made fists at his sides. His eyes were wild. "Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!" he cried.

"It's their way," said Jeni. "They're hunters. It's their way."

There was no anger in her voice.

A creature emerged from the white-barked trees. He stood and stared at Jeni upon the ground. He seemed frightened himself. He lifted his weapon.

Lon stared back, taking in every strange detail. It was his first close look at one of these invaders from the planet called Earth, which was third from the sun and had one moon.

He waited for the noise of the weapon, wondering if he would hear it.

THE END

Man of Distinction

By FREDRIC BROWN

Hanley was the very last man you'd pick to save this old world

THERE was this Hanley, Al Hanley, and you wouldn't have thought to look at him that he was ever going to amount to much. And if you'd known his life history, up to the time the Darians came, you'd never have guessed how thankful you're going to be—once you've read this story—for Al Hanley.

At the time it happened Hanley was drunk. Not that that was anything unusual, he'd been drunk a long time and it was his ambition to stay that way, although it had reached the stage of being a tough job. He had run out of money, then out

of friends to borrow from. He had worked his way down his list of acquaintances to the point where he considered himself lucky to average two bits a head on them.

He had reached the sad stage of having to walk miles to see someone he knew slightly so he could try to borrow a buck or a quarter. The long walk would wear off the effects of the last drink—well, not completely but somewhat—so he was in the predicament of Alice when she was with the Red Queen and had to do all the running she could possibly do just to stay in the same place.

And panhandling strangers was out because the cops had been clamping down on it and if Hanley tried that he'd end up spending a drinkless night in the hoosegow, which would be very bad indeed. He was at the stage now where twelve hours without a drink would give him the bull horrors, which are to the D. T.'s as a cyclone is to a zephyr.

D. T.'s are merely hallucinations. If you're smart you know they're not there. Sometimes they're even companionship if you care for that sort of thing. But the bull horrors are the bull horrors. It takes more drinking than most people can manage to get them and they can come only when a man who's been drunk for longer than he can remember is suddenly and completely deprived of drink for an extended period, as when he is in jail, say.

The mere thought of them had Hanley shaking. Shaking specifically the hand of an old friend whom he had seen only a few times in his life and then under not-too-favorable circumstances. The old friend's name was Kid Eggleston and he was a big but battered ex-pug who had more recently been bouncer in a saloon, where Hanley had met him naturally.

But you needn't concentrate on remembering either his name or his history because he isn't going to last very long as far as this story is concerned. In fact, in exactly one and one-half minutes he is going to scream and then faint and we shall hear no more of him.

But in passing let me mention that if Kid Eggleston *hadn't* screamed and fainted you might not be here now, reading this. You might be strip-mining glanic ore under a green sun at the far edge of the galaxy. You wouldn't like that at all so remember that it was Hanley who saved—and is still saving—you from it. Don't be too hard on him. If Three and Nine had taken the Kid things would be very different.

Three and Nine were from the planet Dar, which is the second (and only habitable) planet of the aforementioned green star at the edge of the galaxy. Three and Nine were not, of course, their full names. Darians' names are numbers and Three's full name or number was 389,057,792,869,223. Or, at least, that would be its translation into the decimal system.

I'm sure you'll forgive me for calling him Three as well as for calling his companion Nine and for having them so address each other. They themselves would *not* forgive me. One Darian always addresses another by his full number and any abbreviation is not only discourteous but insulting. However Darians live much longer than we. They can afford the time and I can't.

AT THE moment when Hanley was shaking the Kid's hand Three and Nine were still about a mile away in an upward direction. They weren't in an airplane or even in a space-ship (and definitely not in a flying saucer.

Sure I know what flying saucers are but ask me about them some other time. Right now I want to stick to the Darians). They were in a space time cube.

I suppose I'll have to explain that. The Darians had discovered—as we may someday discover—that Einstein was right. Matter cannot travel faster than the speed of light without turning into energy. And you wouldn't want to turn into energy, would you? Neither did the Darians when they started their explorations throughout the galaxy.

So they worked it out that one can travel in effect faster than the speed of light if one travels through time simultaneously. Through the time-space continuum, that is, rather than through space itself. Their trip from Dar covered a distance of 163,000 light years.

But since they simultaneously traveled back into the past 1,630 centuries the elapsed time to them had been zero for the journey. On their return they had traveled 1,630 centuries into the future and arrived at their starting point in the space-time continuum. You see what I mean, I hope.

Anyway there was this cube, invisible to terrestrials, a mile over Philadelphia (and don't ask me why they picked Philadelphia—I don't know why anyone would pick Philadelphia for anything). It had been poised there for four days while Three and Nine had picked up and studied radio broadcasts until they were able to speak and understand the prevailing language.

Not, of course, anything at all about our civilization, such as it is, and our customs, such as they are. Can you imagine trying to picture the life of inhabitants of Earth by listening to a mixture of giveaway contests, soap operas, and the Lone Ranger?

Not that they really cared what our civilization was as long as it wasn't highly enough developed to be any threat to them—and they were pretty sure of that by the end of four days. You can't blame them for getting that impression and anyway it was right.

"Shall we descend?" Three asked Nine.

"Yes," Nine said to Three. Three curled himself around the controls.

". . . sure and I saw you fight," Hanley was saying. "And you were good, Kid. You must've had a bad manager or you'd have hit the top. You had the stuff. How about having a drink with me around the corner?"

"On you or on me, Hanley?"

"Well, at the moment I am a little broke, Kid. But I *need* a drink. For old times' sake—"

"You need a drink like I need a hole in my head. You're drunk now and you'd better sober up before you get the D. T.'s."

"Got 'em now," Hanley said. "Think nothing of 'em. Look, there they are coming up behind you."

Illogically Kid Eggleston turned and looked. He screamed and fainted. Three and Nine were approaching. Beyond them was the shadowy outline of a monstrous cube twenty feet to a side. The way it was there and yet wasn't was a bit frightening. That must have been what scared the Kid.

There wasn't anything frightening about Three and Nine. They were vermiform, about fifteen feet long (if stretched out) and about a foot thick in the middle, tapering at both ends. They were a pleasing light blue in color and had no visible sense organs so you couldn't tell which end was which—and it didn't really matter because both ends were exactly alike anyway.

And, although they were coming toward Hanley and the now recumbent

Kid, there wasn't even a front end or a back end. They were in the normal coiled position and floating.

"Hi, boys," Hanley said. "You scared my friend, blast you. And he'd have bought me a drink after he lectured me for awhile. So you owe me one."

"Reaction illogical," Three said to Nine. "So was that of the other specimen. Shall we take both?"

"No. The other one, although larger, is obviously a weakling. And one specimen will be sufficient. Come."

Hanley took a step backwards. "If you're going to buy me a drink, okay. Otherwise I want to know, where?"

"Dar."

"You mean we're going from here to Dar? Lissen, Massah, Ah ain't gwine noplace 'tall 'thout you-all buy me a drink."

"Do you understand him?" Nine asked Three. Three wriggled an end negatively. "Shall we take him by force?"

"No need if he'll come voluntarily. Will you enter the cube voluntarily, creature?"

"Is there a drink in it?"

"Yes. Enter, please."

HANLEY walked to the cube and entered it. Not that he believed it was really there, of course, but what did he have to lose? And when you had the D. T.'s it was best to humor them. The cube was solid, not at all amorphous or even transparent from the inside. Three coiled around the controls and delicately manipulated delicate mechanisms with both ends.

"We are in intraspace," he told Nine. "I suggest we remain here until we have studied this specimen further and can give a report on whether he is suitable for our purposes."

"Hey, boys, how about that drink?" Hanley was getting worried. His hands were beginning to shake and spiders were crawling up and down the length of his spine on the inside.

"He seems to be suffering," Nine said. "Perhaps from hunger or thirst. What do these creatures drink? Hydrogen peroxide as we do?"

"Most of the surface of their planet seems to be covered with water in which sodium chloride is present. Shall we synthesize some?"

Hanley yelled, "No! Not even water without salt. I want a drink! Whisky!"

"Shall I analyze his metabolism?" Three asked. "With the intrafluoroscope I can do it in a second." He unwound himself from the controls and went to a strange machine. Lights flashed. Three said, "How strange. His metabolism depends on C^2H^5OH."

"C^2H^5OH?"

"Yes, alcohol—at least, basically. With a certain dilution of H^2O and without the sodium chloride present in their seas, as well as exceedingly minor quantities of other ingredients, it seems to be all that he has consumed for at least an extended period. There is .234 per-cent present in his blood stream and in his brain. His entire metabolism seems to be based on it."

"BOYS," Hanley begged. "I'm *dying* for a drink. How's about laying off the double-talk and giving me one."

"Wait, please," Nine said. "I shall make you what you require. Let me use the verniers on that intrafluoroscope and add the psychometer." More lights flashed and Nine went into the corner of the cube which was a laboratory. Things happened there and he came back in less than a minute. He carried a beaker containing slightly less than two quarts of clear amber fluid.

Hanley sniffed it, then sipped it. He sighed.

"I'm dead," he said "This is *usquebaugh,* the nectar of the gods. There isn't any such drink as *this.*" He drank

deeply and it didn't even burn his throat.

"What is it, Nine?" Three asked.

"A quite complex formula, fitted to his exact needs. It is fifty per-cent alcohol, forty-five per-cent water. The remaining ingredients, however, are considerable in number; they include every vitamin and mineral his system requires, in proper proportion and all properties are tasteless.

"Then other ingredients in minute quantities to improve the taste—by his standards. It would taste horrible to us, even if we could drink either alcohol or water."

Hanley sighed and drank deeply. He swayed a little. He looked at Three and grinned. "Now I *know* you aren't there," he said.

"What does he mean?" Nine asked Three.

"His thought processes seem completely illogical. I doubt if his species would make suitable slaves. But we'll make sure, of course. What is your name, creature?"

"What's in a name, pal?" Hanley asked. "Call me anything. You guys are my bes' frien's. You can take me anywhere and jus' lemme know when we get Dar."

He drank deeply and lay down on the floor. Strange sounds came from him but neither Three nor Nine could identify them as words. They sounded like "Zzzzzz, glup—Zzzzzz—glup, Zzzzzz, glup." They tried to prod him awake and failed.

They observed him and made what tests they could. It wasn't until hours later that he awoke. He sat up and stared at them. He said, "I don't believe it. You aren't here. For Gossake, give me a drink quick."

THEY gave him the beaker again—Nine had replenished it and it was full. Hanley drank. He closed his eyes in bliss. He said, "Don't wake me."

"But you are awake."

"Then don't put me to sleep. Jus' figured what this is. Ambrosia—stuff the gods drink."

"Who are the gods?"

"There aren't any. But this is what they drink. On Olympus."

Three said, "Thought processes completely illogical."

Hanley lifted the beaker. He said, "Here is here and Dar is Dar and never the twain shall meet. Here's to the twain." He drank.

Three asked, "What is a twain?"

Hanley gave it thought. He said. "A twain is something that wuns on twacks, and you wide on it from here to Dar."

"What do you know about Dar?"

"Dar ain't no such things as you are. But here's to you, boys."

"Too stupid to be trained for anything except simple physical labor," Three said. "But if he has sufficient stamina for that we can still recommend a raid in force upon this planet. There are probably three or four billion inhabitants. And we can use unskilled labor—three or four billion would help us considerably."

"Hooray!" said Hanley.

"He does not seem to coordinate well," Three said thoughtfully. "But perhaps his physical strength is considerable. Creature, what shall we call you?"

"Call me Al, boys." Hanley was getting to his feet.

"Is that your name or your species? In either case is it the full designation?"

Hanley leaned against the wall. He considered. "Species," he said. "Stands for—let's make it Latin." He made it Latin.

"We wish to test your stamina. Run back and forth from one side of this cube to the other until you become fatigued. Here, I will hold that beaker of your food."

He took the beaker out of Hanley's hands. Hanley grabbed for it. "One more drink. One more li'l drink. Then I'll run for you. I'll run for President."

"Perhaps he needs it," Three said. "Give it to him, Nine."

It might be his last for awhile so Hanley took a long one. Then he waved cheerily at the four Darians who seemed to be looking at him. He said, "See you at the races, boys. All of you. An' bet on me. Win, place an' show. 'Nother li'l drink first?"

He had another little drink—really a short one this time—less than two ounces.

"Enough," Three said. "Now run."

Hanley took two steps and fell flat on his face. He rolled over on his back and lay there, a blissful smile on his face.

"Incredible!" Three said."Perhaps he is attempting to fool us. Check him, Nine."

Nine checked. "Incredible!" he said. "Indeed incredible after so little exertion but he is completely unconscious —unconscious to the degree of being insensible to pain. And he is not faking. His type is completely useless to Dar. Set the controls and we shall report back. And take him, according to our subsidiary orders, as a specimen for the zoological gardens. He'll be worth having there. Physically he is the strangest specimen we have discovered on any of several million planets."

Three wrapped himself around the controls and used both ends to manipulate mechanisms. A hundred and sixty-three thousand light years and 1,630 centuries passed, cancelling each other out so completely and perfectly that neither time nor distance seemed to have been traversed.

In the capital city of Dar, which rules thousands of useful planets, and has visited millions of useless ones—like Earth—Al Hanley occupies a large glass cage in a place of honor as a truly amazing specimen.

There is a pool in the middle of it, from which he drinks often and in which he has been known to bathe. It is filled with a constantly flowing supply of a beverage that is delicious beyond all deliciousness, that is to the best whisky of Earth as the best whisky of Earth is to bathtub gin made in a dirty bathtub. Moreover it is fortified —tastelessly—with every vitamin and mineral his metabolism requires.

It causes no hangovers or other unpleasant consequences. It is a drink as delightful to Hanley as the amazing conformation of Hanley is delightful to the frequenters of the zoo, who stare at him in bewilderment and then read the sign on his cage, which leads off in what looks to be Latin with the designation of his species as Al told it to Three and Nine:

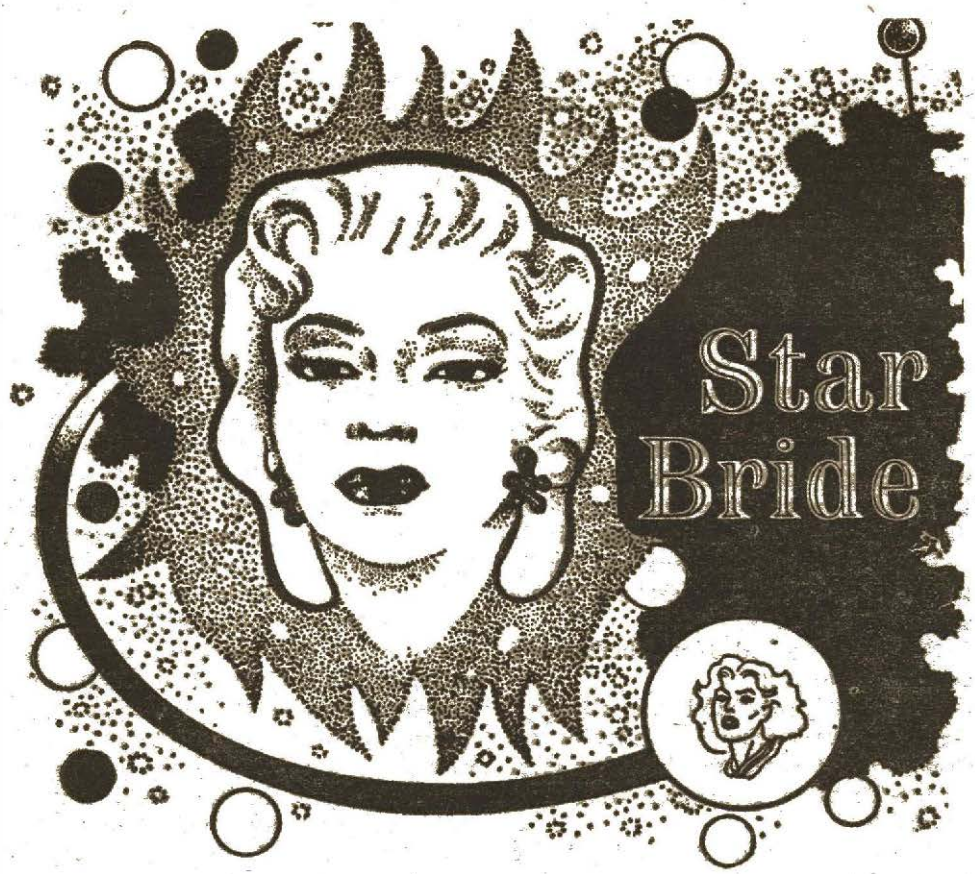
ALCOHOLICUS ANONYMOUS

Lives on diet of C2 H5 OH, slightly fortified with vitamins and minerals. Occasionally brilliant but completely illogical. Extent of stamina—able to take only a few steps without falling. Utterly without value commercially but a fascinating specimen of the strangest form of life yet discovered in the Galaxy. Habitat—Planet 3 of Sun JX6547HG908.

So strange, in fact, that they have given him a treatment that makes him practically immortal. And a good thing that is because he's so interesting as a zoological specimen that if he ever dies they might come back to Earth for another one. And they might happen to pick up you or me—and you or I, as the case might be, might happen to be sober.

And that would be very bad for all of us.

THE END



By ANTHONY BOUCHER

Her rival was a gal in space

I ALWAYS knew, ever since we were in school together, that he'd love me some day; and I knew somehow too that I'd always be in second place. I didn't really care either, but I never guessed then what I'd come second to: a native girl from a conquered planet.

I couldn't guess because those school days were before the Conquest and the Empire, back in the day when we used to talk about a rocket to a moon and never dreamed how fast it would all happen after that rocket.

When it did all begin to happen I thought at first what I was going to come second to was Space itself. But that wasn't for long and now Space can never take him away from me and neither can she, not really, because she's dead.

But he sits there by the waters and talks and I can't even hate her, because she was a woman too, and she loved him too, and those were what she died of.

He doesn't talk about it as often as he used to, and I suppose that's something. It's only when the fever's bad, or he's tried to talk to the Federal Council again about a humane colonial policy. That's worse than the fever.

He sits there and he looks up at her

star and he says, "But damn it, they're *people.* Oh, I was like all the rest at first; I was expecting some kind of monster even after the reports from the Conquest troops. And when I saw that they looked almost like us, and after all those months in the space ship, with the old regulation against mixed crews. . . ."

He has to tell it. The psychiatrist explained that to me very carefully. I'm only glad it doesn't come so often now.

"Everybody in Colonial Administration was doing it," he says. "They'd pick the girl that came the closest to somebody back home and they'd go through the Vlnian marriage rite—which of course isn't recognized legally under the C. A., at least not where we're concerned."

I've never asked him whether she came close to me.

"It's a very beautiful rite, though," he says. "That's what I keep telling the Council: Vln had a much higher level of pre-Conquest civilization than we'll admit.

"It was living with her that made me know," he says. "Being with her, part of her, knowing that there was nothing grotesque, nothing monstrous about green and white flesh in the same bed."

No, that's what he used to say. He doesn't say that part any more.

The psychiatrist explained how he's transferring his guilt to the Council and the Colonial policy; but I still don't see why he has to have guilt. He couldn't help it. He wanted to come back.

Only that was the trip he got space fever, and of course after that he was planet-bound for life.

"She had a funny name," he says. "I never could pronounce it right—all vowels. So I called her Starbride, even though she said that was foolish—we both belonged to the same star, the sun, even if we were of different planets. Now is that a primitive reaction? I tell you the average level of Vlnian scientific culture. . . .

"I swore to come back before the child was born," he said. "I swore by her God and by mine and He heard me under both names. And she said very simply, 'If you don't, I'll die.' That's all, just 'I'll die.' And then we drank native wine and sang folksongs all night and went to bed in the dawn."

And he doesn't need to tell me about his letter to her, but he does. He doesn't need to because I sent it myself. It was the first thing he thought of when he came out of the fever and saw the calendar and I wrote it down for him and sent it. And it came back with the C. A. stamp: *Deceased.*

"And I don't know how she died," he says, "or even whether the child was born. Try to find out anything about a native from the Colonial Administrator! They've got to be made to realize. . . ."

Then he usually doesn't talk for a while. He just sits there by the waters and looks up at the blue star and sings their sad folksongs with the funny names: *Saint Louis Blues* and *Barbara Allen* and *Lover, Come Back To Me.*

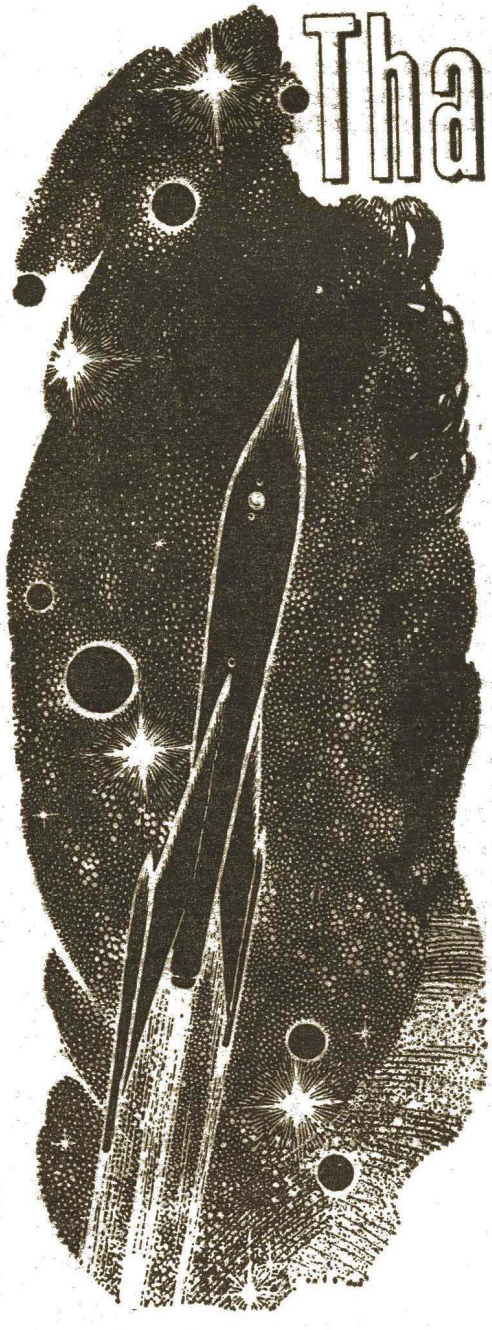
And after a while I say, "I'm not planet-bound. Some day when you're well enough for me to leave you I'll go to Vln—"

" *'Earth,'* " he says, almost as though it was a love-word and not just a funny noise. "That's their name for Vln. She called herself an earth woman, and she called me her martian."

"I'll go to Earth," I say, only I never can pronounce it quite right and he always laughs a little, "and I'll find your child and I'll bring it back to you."

Then he turns and smiles at me and after a while we leave the waters of the canal and go inside again away from her blue star and I can stand coming second even to a dead native white Starbride from the Planet Earth.

THE END



Thanasphere

By KURT VONNEGUT, JR.

What awful thing gripped the pilot up there?

AT NOON, Wednesday, July 26th, windowpanes in the small mountain towns of Sevier County, Tennessee, were rattled by the shock and faint thunder of a distant explosion rolling down the northwest slopes of the Great Smokies. The explosion came from the general direction of the closely guarded Air Forces experimental station in the forest ten miles northwest of Elkmont.

Said the Air Forces Office of Public Information, "No comment."

That evening amateur astronomers in Omaha, Nebraska, and Glenwood, Iowa, reported independently that a speck had crossed the face of the full moon at 9:57 P.M. There was a flurry of excitement on the news wires. Astronomers at the major North American observatories denied that they had seen it.

They lied.

In Boston on the morning of Thursday, July 27th, an enterprising newsman sought out Dr. Bernard Groszinger, youthful rocket consultant for the Air Forces. "Is it possible that what crossed the moon was a space ship?" the newsman asked.

Dr. Groszinger laughed at the question. "My own opinion is that we're beginning another cycle of flying saucer scares," he said. "This time everyone's seeing space ships between us and the moon. You can tell your readers this, my friend: No rocket ship will leave the earth for at least another twenty years."

He lied.

He knew a great deal more than he was saying, but somewhat less than he himself thought. He did not believe in ghosts, for instance—and had yet to learn of the Thanasphere.

Dr. Groszinger rested his long legs on his cluttered desktop, and watched his secretary conduct the disappointed newsman through the locked door, unlocked for the moment, and past the armed guards. He lighted a cigarette and tried to relax before going back into the stale air and tension of the radio room. "IS YOUR SAFE LOCKED?" asked a sign on the wall, tacked there by a diligent security officer. The sign annoyed him. Security officers, security regulations only served to slow his work, to make him think about things he had no time to think about.

The secret papers in the safe weren't secrets. They said what had been known for centuries: Given fundamental physics, it follows that a projectile fired into space in *X* direction, at *Y* miles per hour, will travel in the arc Z. He modified the equation: Given fundamental physics and one billion dollars . . .

Impending war had given him the opportunity to try the experiment. The threat of war was an incident, the military men about him an irritating condition of work—*the experiment* was the heart of the matter.

There were no unknowns, he reflected, finding contentment in the dependability of the physical world. Young Dr. Groszinger smiled, thinking of Christopher Columbus and his crew, who hadn't known what lay ahead of them, who had been scared stiff of sea monsters that didn't exist. Maybe the average person of today felt the same way about space. The Age of Superstition still had a few years to run.

But the men in the space ship two thousand miles from earth had no unknowns to fear. The sullen Major Allen Rice would have nothing surprising to report on his radio messages. He could only confirm what reason had already revealed about outer space.

The major American observatories, working closely with the project, reported that the ship was now moving around the Earth in the predicted orbit at the predicted velocity. Soon, any time now, the first message from outer space in history would be received in the radio room. The broadcast could be on an ultra-high-frequency band where no one had ever sent or received messages before.

The first message was overdue, but nothing had gone wrong—nothing *could* go wrong, Dr. Groszinger assured himself again. Machines, not men, were guiding the flight. The man was a mere observer, piloted to his lonely vantage point by infallible electronic brains, swifter than his own. He had controls in his ship, but only for gliding down through the atmosphere, when and if they brought him back from space. He was equipped to stay for several years.

Even the man was as much like a machine as possible, Dr. Groszinger thought with satisfaction. He was quick, strong, unemotional. Psychiatrists had picked Major Rice from a hundred volunteers, and predicted that he would function as perfectly as the rocket motors, the metal hull and the electronic controls. His specifications: Husky, twenty-nine years of age; fifty-five missions over Europe during World War II without a sign of fatigue; a childless widower, melancholy and solitary; a career soldier, a demon for work.

The Major's mission? Simple: To report weather conditions over enemy

territory, and to observe the accuracy of guided atomic missiles in the event of war.

Major Rice was fixed in the solar system, two thousand miles about the earth now—close by, really—the distance from New York to Salt Lake City, not far enough away to see much of the polar icecaps, even. With a telescope, Rice could pick out small towns and the wakes of ships without much trouble. It would be breathtaking to watch the enormous blue and green ball; to see night creeping around it, and clouds and storms growing and swirling over its face.

Dr. Groszinger tamped out his cigarette, absently lighted another almost at once, and strode down the corridor to the small laboratory where the radio equipment had been set up.

Lieutenant General Franklin Dane, head of Project Cyclops, sat next to the radio operator, his uniform rumpled, his collar open. He stared expectantly at the loud-speaker before him. The floor was littered with sandwich wrappings and cigarette butts. Coffee-filled paper cups stood before the General and the radio operator, and beside the canvas chair where Groszinger had spent the night, waiting.

General Dane nodded to Groszinger, and motioned with his hand for silence.

"Able Baker Fox, this is Dog Easy Charley. Able Baker Fox, this is Dog Easy Charley..." droned the radio operator wearily, using the code names. "Can you hear me, Able Baker Fox?"

The loud-speaker crackled; then, tuned to its peak volume, boomed: "This is Able Baker Fox. Come in, Dog Easy Charley. Over."

GENERAL DANE jumped to his feet and embraced Dr. Groszinger. Both laughed idiotically, and pounded each other on the back. The General snatched the microphone from the radio operator. "You made it, Able Baker Fox! Right on course! What's it like, boy? What's it feel like? Over." Dr. Groszinger, his arm draped around the General's shoulders, leaned forward eagerly, his ear a few inches from the speaker. The radio operator tuned the volume down, so that they could hear something of the quality of Major Rice's voice.

The voice came through again, soft, hesitant. The tone disturbed Dr. Groszinger—he had wanted it to be crisp, sharp, efficient.

"This side of the earth's dark, very dark just now. And I feel like I'm falling—the way you said I would. Over."

"Is anything the matter?" asked the General anxiously. "You sound as though something—"

The Major cut in before he could finish: "There! Did you hear that?"

"Able Baker Fox, we can't hear anything," said the General, looking perplexedly at Dr. Groszinger. "What is it—some kind of noise in your receiver? Over."

"A child," said the Major. "I hear a child crying. Don't you hear it? And now—listen!—now an old man is trying to comfort it." His voice seemed farther away, as though he were no longer speaking directly into his microphone.

"That's impossible, ridiculous!" said Dr. Groszinger. "Check your set, Able Baker Fox, check your set. Over."

"They're getting louder, now. The voices are louder. I can't hear you very well above them. It's like standing in the middle of a crowd, with everybody trying to get my attention at once. It's like..." The message trailed off. They could hear a shushing sound in the speaker. The Major's transmitter was still on.

"Can you hear me, Able Baker Fox? Answer! Can you hear me?" called General Dane.

The shushing noise stopped. The General and Dr. Groszinger stared blankly at the speaker.

"Able Baker Fox, this is Dog Easy Charley," chanted the radio operator. "Able Baker Fox, this is Dog Easy Charley..."

DR. GROSZINGER, his eyes shielded from the glaring ceiling light of the radio room by a newspaper, lay fully dressed on the cot that had been brought in for him. Every few minutes he ran his long, slender fingers through his tangled hair and swore. His machine had worked perfectly, *was* working perfectly. The one thing he had not designed, the damn' man in it, had failed, had destroyed the whole experiment.

They had been trying for six hours to re-establish contact with the lunatic who peered down at Earth from his tiny steel moon and heard voices.

"He's coming in again, sir," said the radio operator. "This is Dog Easy Charley. Come in, Able Baker Fox. Over."

"This is Able Baker Fox. Clear weather over Zones 7, 11, 19 and 23. Zones 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 overcast. Storm seems to be shaping up over Zones 8 and 9, moving south by southwest at about 18 miles an hour. Over."

"He's okay now," said the General, relieved.

Dr. Groszinger remained supine, his head still covered with the newspaper. "Ask him about the voices," he said.

"You don't hear the voices any more, *do* you, Able Baker Fox?"

"What do you mean I don't hear them? I can hear them better than I can hear you. Over."

"He's out of his head," said Dr. Groszinger, sitting up.

"I heard that," said Major Rice evenly. "Maybe I am. It shouldn't be too hard to check. All you have to do is find out if an Andrew Tobin died in Evansville, Indiana, on February 17, 1927. Over."

"I don't follow you, Able Baker Fox," the General said uneasily. "Who was Andrew Tobin? Over."

"He's one of the voices." There was an uncomfortable pause. Major Rice cleared his throat. "Claims his brother murdered him. Over."

The radio operator had risen slowly from his stool, his face chalk-white. Groszinger pushed him back down, and took the microphone from the General's now limp hand.

"Either you've lost your mind, or this is the most sophomoric practical joke in history, Able Baker Fox," said Dr. Groszinger impatiently. "This is *Groszinger* you're talking to, and you're dumber than I think you are if you think you can kid me." He nodded. "Over."

"I can't hear you very well any more, Dog Easy Charley. Sorry, but the voices are getting louder."

"Rice! Straighten out!" said Dr. Groszinger.

"There—I caught that: Mrs. Pamela Ritter wants her husband Harvey to marry again for the sake of the children. He lives at—"

"Stop it!"

"He lives at 1577 Damon Place, in Scotia, New York. Over and out."

General Dane shook Dr. Groszinger's shoulder gently. "You've been asleep five hours," he said. "It's midnight." He handed him a cup of hot coffee. "We've got some more messages. Interested?"

Dr. Groszinger sipped the coffee. "Is he still raving?"

"He still hears the voices, if that's what you mean." The General dropped two unopened telegrams in Dr. Groszinger's lap. "Thought you might like to be the one to open these."

Dr. Groszinger laughed quietly. "Went ahead and checked Scotia and Evansville, did you? God help the Army, if all the generals are as superstitious as you, my friend."

"Okay, okay, you're the scientist, you're the brain-box. That's why I want *you* to open the telegrams. I want you to tell me what in hell's going on."

Dr. Groszinger smiled patronizingly, and opened the telegrams.

HARVEY RITTER LISTED FOR 1577 DAMON PLACE, SCOTIA. G-E ENGINEER. WIDOWER, TWO CHILDREN. DECEASED WIFE NAMED PAMELA. DO YOU NEED

MORE INFORMATION? R. B. FAILEY, CHIEF, SCOTIA POLICE

Dr. Groszinger shrugged, and handed the message to General Dane. He read the other telegram:

RECORDS SHOW ANDREW TOBIN DIED IN HUNTING ACCIDENT FEBRUARY 7, 1927. BOTHER PAUL LEADING BUSINESSMAN. OWNS COAL BUSINESS STARTED BY ANDREW. CAN FURNISH FURTHER DETAILS IF NEEDED. F. B. JOHNSON, CHIEF, EVANSVILLE P.D.

"I'm not surprised," said Dr. Groszinger blandly. "I expected something like this. I suppose you're firmly convinced now that our friend Major Rice has found outer space populated by ghosts and is now able to communicate with them?"

"Well, I'd say he's sure as hell found it populated by something," said the General, reddening.

Dr. Groszinger wadded the second telegram in his fist, and threw it across the room, missing the wastebasket by a foot. He folded his hands, and affected the patient, priestlike pose he used in lecturing freshman physics classes. "At first, my friend, we had two possible conclusions: either Major Rice was insane, or he was pulling off a spectacular hoax." He twiddled his thumbs, waiting for the General to digest this intelligence. "Now that we know his spirit messages deal with real people, we've got to conclude that he has planned and is now carrying out some sort of hoax. He got his names and addresses before he took off. God knows what he hopes to accomplish by it. God knows what we can do to make him stop it. That's your problem, I'd say."

The General's eyes narrowed. "So he's trying to jimmy the project, is he? We'll see, by God, we'll see." The radio operator was dozing. The General slapped him on the back. "On the ball, Sergeant, on the ball. Keep calling Rice till you get him, understand?"

The radio operator had to call only once.

"This is Able Baker Fox. Come in, Dog Easy Charley." Major Rice's voice was tired.

"This is Dog Easy Charley," said General Dane sharply. "We've had enough of your voices, Able Baker Fox —do you understand? We don't want to hear any more about them. We're on to your little game. I don't know what your angle is, but I do know I'll bring you back down and slap you on a rock pile in Leavenworth so fast you'll leave your teeth up there. Do we understand each other?" The General bit the tip from a fresh cigar fiercely. "Over."

"Did you check those names and addresses? Over."

The General looked at Dr. Groszinger, who frowned and shook his head. "Sure we did. That doesn't prove anything. So you've got a list of names and addresses up there. So what does that prove? Over."

"You say those names checked? Over."

"I'm telling you to quit it, Rice. Right now. Forget the voices, do you hear? Give me a weather report. Over."

"Clear patches over Zones 11, 15 and 16. Looks like a solid overcast over 1, 2 and 3. All clear over the rest. Over."

"That's more like it, Able Baker Fox," said the General expansively. "We'll forget about the voices, eh? Over."

"There's an old woman calling out something in a German accent. Is Dr. Groszinger there? I think she's calling his name. She's asking him not to get too wound up in his work—not to—"

Dr. Groszinger leaned over the radio operator's shoulder and snapped off the switch on the receiver. "Of all the cheap, sickening stunts," he said angrily.

"Let's hear what he has to say," said the General, half smiling. "Thought you were a scientist."

Dr. Groszinger glared at him defiantly, snapped on the receiver again, and stood back, his hands on his hips.

"—saying something in German,"

continued the voice of Major Rice. "Can't understand it. Maybe you can. I'll give it to you the way it sounds: *'Alles geben die Gotter, die Unendlichen, ihren Lieblingen, ganz. Alle—'* "

Dr. Groszinger turned down the volume. " *'Alle Freuden, die Unendlichen; alle Schmerzen die Unendlichen, ganz,'* " he said faintly. "That's how it ends." He sat down on the cot. "My mother's favorite quotation—something from Goethe."

"I can threaten him again," said the General.

"What for?" Dr. Groszinger shrugged and smiled. "Outer space *is* full of voices." He laughed nervously. *"There's* something to pep up a physics textbook."

"An omen, sir—it's an omen," blurted the radio operator suddenly.

"What the hell do you mean, an omen?" said the General. "So outer space is filled with ghosts. That doesn't surprise me."

"Nothing would, then," said Dr. Groszinger.

"That's exactly right. I'd be a hell of a general if anything would. For all I know the moon is made of green cheese. So what? All I want is a man out there to tell me if I'm hitting what I'm shooting at. I don't give a damn what's going on in outer space."

"Don't you see, sir?" said the operator. "Don't you see? It's an omen. When people find out about all the spirits out there, they'll forget about war. They won't want to think about anything but the spirits."

"Relax, Sergeant," said the General dryly. "Nobody's going to find out about them, understand?"

"You can't suppress a discovery like this," said Dr. Groszinger in amazement."

"You're nuts, if you think I can't," said General Dane. "How're you going to tell anybody about this business without telling them we've got a rocket ship out there?"

"They've got a right to know," said the radio operator heatedly, in defiance.

"If the world finds out we've got that ship out there, that's the start of World War III," said the General. "Now tell me you want that. That's when the cold war gets hot, my boy. The enemy won't have any choice but to try and blow the hell out of us before we can put Major Rice to good use. And there'd be nothing for us to do but try and blow the hell out of them first. Is that what you want?"

"No, sir," said the radio operator. "I guess not, sir." He sat listlessly, his hands folded in his lap.

"Well we can experiment, anyway," said Dr. Groszinger. "We can find out as much as possible about what the spirits are like. We can send Rice out in a wider orbit to find out how far out he can hear the voices, and whether—"

"Not on Air Forces funds, you can't," said General Dane. "That isn't what Rice is out there for. We can't afford to piddle around. We need him right there."

There was silence.

"All right, all right," said Dr. Groszinger. "Then let's hear what he has to say."

"Tune him in, Sergeant," said the General.

"Yes sir." He fiddled apathetically with the dials. "He doesn't seem to be transmitting now, sir." The shushing noise of a transmitter cut into the hum of the loudspeaker. "I guess he's coming in again. Able Baker Fox, this is Dog Easy Charley—"

"King Two X ray William Love, Zebra King in Dallas," said the loudspeaker. The voice had a soft drawl, and was pitched much higher than Major Rice's.

A BASS voice answered: "This is King Two X ray William Love in Albany. Come in W5ZZK, I hear you well. How do you hear me? Over."

"You're clear as a bell, K2XWL—25,000 megacycles on the button. I'm trying to cut down on my drift with a—"

The voice of Major Rice cut in. "I can't hear you clearly, Dog Easy Charley. The voices are a steady roar now. I can catch bits of what they're saying. Grantland Whitman, the Hollywood actor, is yelling that his will was tampered with by his nephew Carl. He says—"

"Say again K2XWL," said the drawling voice. "I must have misunderstood what you said. Over."

"I didn't say anything, W5ZZK. What was that about Grantland Whitman? Over."

"The crowd's quieting down," said Major Rice. "Now there's just one voice—a young woman, I think. It's so soft, I can't make out what she's saying."

"What's going on, K2XWL? Can you hear me, K2XWL?"

"She's calling my name," said Major Rice excitedly.

"Jam the frequency, dammit!" cried the General frantically. "Yell, whistle —do something!"

EARLY-MORNING car traffic past the university came to a honking, bad-tempered stop, as Dr. Groszinger absently crossed the street against the light, on his way back to his office and the radio room. He looked up in surprise, mumbled an apology, and hurried to the curb. He had had a solitary breakfast in an all-night diner a block and a half away from the laboratory building, and then he'd taken a long walk. He had hoped that getting away for a couple of hours would clear his head—but the feeling of confusion and helplessness was still with him. Did the world have a right to know, or didn't it?

There had been no more messages from Major Rice. At the General's orders, the frequency had been jammed. Now the unexpected eavesdroppers could hear nothing but a steady whine at 25,000 megacycles. General Dane had reported the dilemma to Washington shortly after midnight. Perhaps orders as to what to do with Major Rice had come through by now.

He paused in a patch of sunlight on the laboratory building's steps, and read again the front-page news story, which ran fancifully for a column, beneath the headline, MYSTERY RADIO MESSAGE REVEALS POSSIBLE WILL FRAUD. The story told of two radio amateurs, experimenting illegally on the supposedly unused ultra-high frequency band, who had been amazed to hear a man chattering about voices and a will. The amateurs had broken the law, operating on an unassigned frequency, but they hadn't kept their mouths shut about their discovery. Now, hams all over the world would be building sets so they could listen in, too.

"Morning, sir. Nice morning, isn't it?" said a guard, coming off duty. He was a cheerful, fat Irishman

"Fine morning, all right," agreed Dr. Groszinger. "Clouding up a little in the west, maybe." He wondered what the guard would say if he told him what he knew. He would laugh, probably.

Dr. Groszinger's secretary was dusting off his desk when he walked in. "You could use some sleep, couldn't you?" she said. "Honestly, why you men don't take better care of yourselves I just don't know. If you had a wife, she'd make you—"

"Never felt better in my life," said Dr. Groszinger. "Any word from General Dane?"

"He was looking for you about ten minutes ago. He's back in the radio room now. He's been on the phone with Washington for half an hour."

She had only the vaguest notion of what the project was about. Again Dr. Groszinger felt the urge to tell about Major Rice and the voices, to see what effect the news would have on someone else. Perhaps the secretary would react as he himself had reacted, dully, without excitement; or perhaps as the General had reacted, with a shrug. Maybe

that was the spirit of this world of the atom bomb, H-bomb, God-knows-what-next-bomb—to be amazed at nothing. Science had given humanity forces enough to destroy the earth; and politics had given humanity a fair assurance that the forces would be used. There could be no cause for awe to top *that* one. But proof of a spirit world might at least equal it. Maybe that was the shock the world needed; maybe word from the spirits could change the suicidal course of history.

General Dane looked up wearily as Dr. Groszinger walked into the radio room. "They're bringing him down," he said. "There's nothing else we can do. He's no damn' good to us now." The loudspeaker, turned down low, sang the monotonous hum of the jamming signal. The radio operator slept before the set, his head resting on his folded arms.

"Did you try to get through to him again?"

"Twice. He's clear off his head now. Tried to tell him to change his frequency, to code his messages, but he just went on jabbering like he couldn't hear me—talking about that woman's voice."

"Who's the woman? Did he say?"

The General looked at him oddly. "Says it's his wife Margaret. Guess that's enough to throw anybody, wouldn't you say?" General Dane raised his eyebrows. "Pretty bright, weren't we, sending up a guy with no family ties." He arose and stretched. "I'm going out for a minute. Just make sure you keep your hands off that set." He slammed the door behind him.

The radio operator stirred. "They're bringing him down," he said thickly.

"I know," said Dr. Groszinger.

"That'll kill him, won't it?"

"He has controls for gliding her in, once he hits the atmosphere."

"If he wants to."

"That's right—if he wants to. They'll get him out of his orbit and back to the atmosphere under rocket power. After that, it'll be up to him to take over and make the landing."

They fell silent. The only sound in the room was the muted jamming signal in the loudspeaker.

"He don't want to live, you know that?" said the radio operator suddenly. "Would you want to?"

"Guess that's something you don't know until you come up against it," said Dr. Groszinger vaguely, his thoughts elsewhere. He was trying to imagine the world of the future—a world in constant touch with the spirits, the living inseparable from the dead. It was bound to come. Other men, probing into space, were certain to find out. Would it make life heaven or hell? Every bum and genius, criminal and hero, average man and madman, now and forever part of humanity—advising, squabbling, conniving, placating . . .

The radio operator looked furtively toward the door. "Want to hear him once more?"

Dr. Groszinger shook his head. "Everybody's listening to that frequency now. We'd all be in a nice mess if you stopped jamming." He didn't want to hear more. He was baffled, miserable. Would Death unmasked drive men to suicide or bring new hope? he was asking himself. Would the living desert their leaders, and turn to the dead for guidance? To Caesar . . . Charlemagne . . . Peter the Great . . . Napoleon . . . Bismarck . . . Lincoln . . . Roosevelt? To Jesus Christ? Were the dead wiser than—

Before Dr. Groszinger could stop him, the Sergeant switched off the oscillator that was jamming the frequency.

Major Rice's voice came through instantly, high and giddy. ". . . thousands of them, thousands of them, all around me, standing on nothing, shimmering like northern lights—beautiful, curving off in space, all

around the earth like a glowing fog. I can see them, do you hear? I can see them now. I can see Margaret. She's waving and smiling, misty, heavenly, beautiful. If only you could see it, if—"

The radio operator quickly flicked on the jamming signal again. There was a footfall in the hallway.

General Dane stalked into the radio room, carefully studying his watch.

"In five minutes they'll start him down," he said. He plunged his hands deep into his pockets and slouched dejectedly. "We failed this time. Next time, by God, we'll make it. The next man who goes up will know what he's up against—he'll be ready to take it."

He put his hand on Dr. Groszinger's shoulder. "The most important job you'll ever have to do, my friend, is to keep your mouth shut about those spirits out there, do you understand? We don't want the enemy to know what they'll come across if they try it. The security of this country depends on that being our secret. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir," said Dr. Groszinger softly, grateful to have no choice but to be quiet. He didn't want to be the one to tell the world. He wished he had had nothing to do with sending Rice into space. What discovery of the dead would do to humanity he didn't know, but the impact would be terrific. Now, like the rest, he would have to wait nervously for the next wild twist of history.

The General looked at his watch again. "They're bringing him down."

AT 1:39 P.M., on Friday, July 28th, the British liner *Capricorn,* 280 miles out of New York City, bound for Liverpool, radioed that an unidentified object had crashed into the sea, sending up a towering geyser on the horizon to starboard of the ship. Several passengers were said to have seen something glinting as it fell from the sky. Upon reaching the scene of the crash, the *Capricorn* reported finding dead and stunned fish on the surface, and turbulent water, but no wreckage.

Newspapers suggested that the *Capricorn* had seen the crash of an experimental rocket fired out to sea in a test of range. The Secretary of Defense promptly denied that any such tests were under way over the Atlantic.

In Boston, Dr. Bernard Groszinger, young rocket consultant for the Air Forces, told newsmen that what the *Capricorn* had observed might well have been a meteor.

"That seems quite likely," he said. "If it was a meteor, the fact that it reached the earth's surface should, I think, be one of the year's most important science news stories. Usually, meteors burn to nothing before they're even through the stratosphere."

"Excuse me, sir," interrupted a reporter. "Is there anything out beyond the stratosphere—I mean, is there any name for it?"

"Well, actually the term stratosphere is kind of arbitrary. It's the outer shell of the atmosphere. You can't say definitely where it stops. Beyond it is just, well—dead space."

"Dead space—that's the right name for it, eh?" said the reporter.

"If you want something fancier, maybe we could put it into Greek," said Dr. Groszinger playfully. *"Thanatos,* that's Greek for death, I think. Maybe instead of 'dead space' you'd prefer 'Thanasphere.' Has a nice scientific ring to it, don't you think?"

The newsmen laughed politely.

"Dr. Groszinger, when's the first rocket ship going to make it into space?" asked another.

Dr. Groszinger waved his hand impatiently at the newsmen.

"You people read too many comic books. Come back in twenty years, and maybe I'll have a story for you by then."

THE END

(Continued from page 31)

pushed the screen door open and stepped out onto the cool sand. The breakers were white froth in the moonlight.

The feeling of emotional strain came through more clearly. He turned to the left and felt it fade as he walked, so he turned quickly toward the south, quickening his step as he saw Faven, tall in the moonlight, staring down toward the line of surf.

Sixty feet away, directly in front of Faven, Martha walked toward the surf and even at that distance Amro could see the jerky uncoordinated movements. Her pajamas were a colorless paleness and her shoulders were straight. Even as he watched she reached the surf. A wave smashed at her feet, flooded halfway to her knees. The next wave crashed full against her thighs, driving her back a step.

He reached up through the higher frequencies and found the level on which Faven was directing her commands. He smashed back along that channel made stronger by anger. Faven put her hands to her throat and turned to face him.

For a moment they fought thus, the Earthgirl forgotten. While Faven fenced with quick, darting impacts he wielded the bludgeon of his mind, smashed down her guard, smashed her to her knees with a small whimpering sound coming from her throat.

Once he had her helpless it did not take all of his directed will to hold her there. He turned and saw Martha walking steadily toward them, her mouth slack, and for a moment he was afraid that Faven had scoured clean the inside of the girl-brain with the abrasive of her will, leaving it childlike.

He turned his thoughts completely to Martha for a fraction of a second, then swept them back to Faven just as she started to scramble to her feet. The blow dropped her face down, her arms and legs spread. He knew that it had been violent enough so that the aftereffects would not wear off for minutes.

The chunk of coral was half buried in the sand.

He took control of Martha's mind, forced her to pick up the coral. "Now you can kill her," he said.

"No."

"Why not? She tried to kill you."

"No, Quinn. *No!*"

He exerted a stronger pressure, brought her close to Faven, the coral grasped in both hands, lifted high.

The coral slipped harmlessly to the side. Martha knelt, her hands covering her face, sobs harsh in her throat.

Faven lifted herself to hands and knees.

"Why didn't she?" Faven asked, utterly surprised.

"It's something in their minds," he said in his own tongue. "They can't kill. Life is something individual and sacred to them. Also, Faven, you might be glad if she had succeeded. You know the discipline. I am in charge. Why did you try to do this thing?"

"You weren't to know. It was to have been an accident."

Faven got up slowly. The Earthgirl still knelt and wept. As quick as a darting cat, Faven snatched up the chunk of coral and smashed it full at the girl's head. At the last moment Amro tried to divert it. Martha toppled over slowly. Faven stood, her feet braced, a look of defiance on her face. But he had found his way into her mind too many times now for her to defy him.

He played with her at first, letting her think she was holding him off, watching the narrowing of her eyes, the dilation of her nostrils, the hard rise and fall of her breast. Then he struck and moved back out of her mind.

"Amro!" she gasped.

He laughed, the sound wild and high in the night, and struck again. He lunged deep into the softness of her

brain, twisting the blow, reaching and ripping. He sensed her wild panic and hammered at her again, this time reaching the threshold of instinct, slipping past it, ripping apart the very basis of her, the fountainhead of individuality.

The lean proud planes of her face softened and deteriorated and the mouth went slack and dull. She stood, a living thing on the animal level, but still erect. Delicately this time, because he wanted the ultimate degradation without complete helplessness, he severed one more strand.

She slumped, apelike, her curled hands hanging to her knees, then sagged until she stood, her legs bowed, holding herself erect by the pressure of her knuckles against the sand. Her underlip sagged so that the lower teeth showed.

She moved slowly toward him, shuffling her feet. Martha, whom he had thought dead, sighed with the utmost weariness and sat up, her cheek black with the color of moonlit blood.

"Quinn," she said, "I dreamed that—"

Faven, attracted, animal-like by the sound and movement, edged over, snuffling with curiosity.

Martha screamed with horror. *"Fran!"*

The alarmed animal scuttled back, settled on its haunches and peered at Martha. Martha Kaynan fell over in a dead faint.

MASSIO, three steps behind Amro, said, "I guess she planned to kill the girl. I wasn't certain enough to tell you about it. She wanted you for herself and you were paying too much attention to the Earthgirl. What now?"

"Take her down the beach and call them and explain and put her through the doorway, Massio. Be quick. I don't want Martha to see her again. I— I lost my head. Lofta will be annoyed. She was an effective agent."

Massio calmed the fears of the animal thing by speaking softly and soothingly. He moved close to it, his hand outstretched. Finally it accepted him as a friend. It grasped his finger and Massio walked it down the beach. It chortled and chattered as it bounded along beside him and some of the sounds were almost like words.

He saw Massio pause and seconds later the doorway was a darker patch against the moon shadows.

The thing was caught and dragged toward the oblong shadow. The last he heard of it was the distant mewling sound it made at the loss of this fine new friend.

Amro picked the Earthgirl up in his arms and carried her back to the house.

* * *

Renaen sat in the usual meeting room and said in a high quaver, "Just two of us now, Dolpha—just two of us."

The old man belched solemnly. "And I guess our questions are answered."

"You mean he was wrong in thinking that the Center had some new thing to use against us?"

"Quite wrong. It was a clever move on their part. They duplicated what they would do if they *had* possessed such a thing and then, when we withdrew agents from defensive operations, which was what they hoped we would do, they struck at one of the most dangerous men the League has. No, they have nothing new."

Something troubled Renaen. She pursed her withered lips. "But, Dolpha, that Center agent was planted, they say, long before the Center pulled in its horns!"

"How can we be sure of that?"

"I guess you're right. But we have to think of what to do now."

"We go back to our usual methods. I'll cancel all of the arrangements Kama made for escape and set up the

usual balance of offensive operations."

"Is that wise?"

"Kama was an alarmist. We can operate better without him. Maybe the Center did us a favor. Now we have to discuss a plan, a new plan, and I like the sound of it."

She fingered her unsteady chin. "A good plan?"

"See what you think. By unwritten agreement, the asteroid home of their Chief cannot be harmed. We have studied him for four years, ever since the old Chief was—uh—removed. One of the young ones has come up with a plan. Their Chief uses a tiny one-man craft when he goes to the asteroid, but he is guarded every moment of the flight by one of their strongest ships. They track him just as carefully as we do.

"A perfect duplicate of his little craft has been made. We have had a substitute ready now for three years, with never a chance to arrange the substitution. The plan is to smuggle the substitute and the duplicate ship onto one of the big freighters. Then it depends on timing.

"The ship which guards him on the return trip from the asteroid is too fast for the duty. So it lies on the Strada side as he comes in. Our freighter will fake takeoff trouble and cut between the little craft and the guard ship. They won't dare open up for fear of harming their own Chief.

"Our best technicians will grapple him and freeze him before he realizes what has gone wrong and then the substitute will be ejected hard enough and soon enough so that he can curve back into the path of observation by the guard ship.

"Then to allay any suspicion the freighter will request the assistance of Center technicians and by that time it will be genuinely out of order. But another of ours, a fast one, will be close enough to lay alongside and offer assistance. Their Chief will be moved into the fast ship fast and by the time the substitution is discovered we'll have him safe."

"Where?"

"Right here, Renaen. Right here, of course."

"I like it!"

"I knew you would."

"We'll kill him?"

"After we find out how much we can get from him."

"We won't get much from him. I can tell you that right now."

"You, Renaen, will have some of the pleasure of trying."

"You are a true friend, Dolpha."

"It is more pleasant with just the two of us, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is," he said jovially. And he thought how much better it would be with only one.

A young agent announced his desire to speak to Dolpha and was admitted. He gave the traditional salute. "Reporting, sir, that we did not receive your approval in sufficient time to intercept. That is if you have decided to approve. Their Chief is now too close to attempt the operation safely."

"It is to be put into effect when he makes his next trip out there."

"Very well, sir."

JAKE INGRAM studied the girl who sat on the oak chair beside his cigarette-scarred desk. He wore khakis with sweat darkened patches under the arms and across the broad back. His gunbelt was hung on the back of his chair.

"You said your name is Kaynan?"

"Martha Kaynan, lieutenant."

He looked at her oddly colored level eyes. A bit more here than meets the eye. Nerve and intelligence, probably. Nice and clean looking. Probably cuddle and purr like a little old kitty-cat if the mood was right. And if the guy was right.

He laboriously forced such specula-

tion out of his mind. "That's quite a lump you got there, Miss."

"It doesn't hurt now."

He yawned and pulled the memo pad over closer to his right hand, took the pencil stub out of the desk drawer. Last night had been rough. Two of the wetbacks had got into a cutting scrape in one of the groves east of town.

"What's your address here?" he asked.

"I'm a house guest at a place on the beach south of Port Isabel. It was rented by Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Raymond. For six months, I believe."

"Gray beat-up job about three and a half—four miles south of here?"

"That's right."

"That's the old Coster place. Yeah, I remember hearing it was rented. Just the three of you out there?"

"One other guest, a Mr. Quinn French. I've known him for about two years. I'd never met the Raymonds before."

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"Last night—about midnight I guess it was—Mrs. Raymond and I had a —you could call it a fight, I guess, on the beach. She—hit me with a rock."

One of Jake Ingram's eyebrows crawled up toward his hair line. "Want to swear out a warrant?"

"Oh, no! Nothing like that."

Jake sighed and laid the pencil stub down. "Then what *do* you want?"

"I want someone to come out there and—and look around just to see if there's anything wrong." The words began to come in a great flood. "I was knocked out and when I came to again Quinn was there and Fran Raymond was like a monkey. It was horrible.

"And I fainted and when I came to again she was gone and neither Jerry nor Quinn would tell me where she went. She looked and acted insane and I don't know what they've done to her. I'm sure Quinn wouldn't do anything but the three of them have acted so funny and they can do funny things to your head just by thinking at you. But if you think hard of a brick wall—"

"Hey, lady! Hey, take it easy!" Jake said. "Don't get yourself all worked up. Let us get this straight. You think something might have happened to Mrs. Raymond. Is that right?"

"Yes, lieutenant."

"That's better. Calm and easy does it. Now what would you like for me to do? You got a car here?"

"Mr. French's car."

"Okay, lady. I'll follow you on back out there and we'll see about this thumping people on the head with rocks. About all the rest of that thinking of brick walls stuff— I don't want to be out of line but maybe you need a rest."

She stood up. "I'll be very grateful, lieutenant. And please do one thing for me. No matter what I say or do, please don't leave me there. I want to get my suitcases and come back into town with you. I'm afraid."

"Glad to do that, lady. Glad to help." He buckled on the gun belt. "Shall we go and take a look?"

The house looked deserted when Martha drove Quinn's convertible into the parking space beside it. The sedan was still there.

The lieutenant drove up beside her and they both got out, clunking the car doors shut behind them.

A TALL black-haired good-looking woman came hurrying out of the house toward them, two men coming more slowly behind her. The Kaynan girl gave a little cry and moved back but the taller woman put her arms around the Kaynan girl, half-laughing and half-crying, begging the Kaynan girl to forgive her.

"Is this Mrs. Raymond?" Jake asked.

"Yes, it is," Martha said.

Jake scowled and tucked his thumbs inside his gunbelt. He addressed himself to the two men. "Just what happened here last night?"

The smaller man looked uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, officer. My wife hasn't been herself for some time. She's recovering now. But once in a while there's a lapse. I don't blame Martha for getting upset. It was my fault that it happened at all. I just didn't hear Fran get out of bed." He turned to Martha. "I don't know how to tell you how sorry we are, Martha. It won't happen again."

The tall woman clung to Martha, smiling through her tears.

Jake said, uncomfortably, "Well, unless Miss Kaynan wants to charge Mrs. Raymond, I don't see how I come into it at all. You want to get your bags now, Miss Kaynan? I'll wait for you."

Mrs. Raymond broke into fresh tears. "Martha, honey, please don't leave just because this horrible thing happened. I'll never forgive myself, never!"

Jake thought Miss Kaynan looked a little like a sleepwalker as she turned toward him and smiled and said, "Please forget what I said in town about going back with you no matter what I might say. I've just been silly about this. You can see that Mrs. Raymond is perfectly all right."

Jake Ingram set his jaw. "No, lady—I made a promise and I'm sticking to it. Go pack up. I'll wait." He didn't like the way the girl looked.

"Oh, come now, officer!" Quinn French said. "Don't be dull about this."

"I made a promise," Jake said.

He was standing up as he said it. And all of a sudden he was sitting down, peering through his own windshield, the speedometer needle on sixty-five, the Port Isabell lighthouse not far ahead.

The car swerved dangerously and he brought it under control and parked on the shoulder of the road. He had a bad case of the shakes and his head hurt. Once he had blacked out years before on Mexican tequila. But even then there were disordered impressions in his mind that he couldn't quite sort out. But this had been a clean-cut thing, frightening in its completeness.

He lit a cigarette with shaking fingers. For a moment he was firm in his resolve to turn around and head back there.

No, better think the sun had done it. For if *they* had done it somehow the most obvious thing in the world would be their ability to do it again. If they could make a man drive his own car they could make him pull his own gun and blow the top of his own head off.

He shrugged. The little lady had told him to go back and leave her there.

The bottle in the glove compartment was hot to the touch and the whiskey was so warm as to be nauseous. But he choked down three hefty swallows. It made him feel better—but not good.

His pride and his confidence had come always from his strong body and stubborn mind. He could trust in them. He wondered if he would ever feel really good, really confident again.

He badly needed an excuse to pistolwhip somebody.

* * *

Quinn and Jerry dragged a table out into the shade of the house and they ate there. Martha had no hunger. She studied Fran across the table from her with the strange idea that there was something subtly wrong. Everything had gone wrong.

She was afraid. And for the first time she began to wonder if she were losing her mind.

The woman across the table could not possibly be the drooling, chattering thing from the moonlight beach. Could not possibly be—yet if she was there was something wrong in the head of Martha Kaynan.

She looked at Fran's hands and at her face, at the pattern of freckles the sun had brought out. She looked for

the freckle on the left cheek—the one she had noticed the day before—the one shaped oddly like an hour glass.

Her fork clattered on the edge of the dish. "You're not Fran Raymond!" Martha whispered aloud. "Thank God you're not! Because if you should be that would mean I'm going mad—and I don't want to be mad. Does anyone?"

"Darling!" Quinn said. "You're upset. Horribly upset! Of course that's Fran!"

"Freckles don't change overnight, Quinn," she said gayly. "They never do. And Fran is dead, isn't she? Who killed her, Quinn? Did you or did Jerry?"

"Please, Martha," Jerry said with a pained expression.

SHE looked around at the three of them. Her eyes were wide. "I just happened to think. Isn't this stupid of me! Just as stupid as can be! If this woman isn't Fran Raymond maybe the other one wasn't. And that means that you're not Jerry and you're not Quinn. I should have guessed that a long time ago. Who are you? Where do you come from?"

They all studied her quite solemnly. She looked into their eyes and saw the eyes of cold cruel strangers.

Amro said, in his own tongue, to Drael, the agent who had replaced Faven, "They did a careless job. She has detected you."

Drael shrugged. "There wasn't much time, you know. And they blamed you for giving them so little time. I wish you were wearing this face. The tissues are raw and there is constant pain."

"What are you saying?" Martha demanded. "Tell me who you are. *Tell* me!"

Amro glanced at Massio. Massio shrugged. "Tell her if you want to, if you think you can explain it. But remember that if you tell her it will be up to you to see that she doesn't sneak off again."

Amro looked at Martha. "Quinn and Fran are dead. Jerry is still alive, I believe. You are quite right. We are —strangers."

Martha sat huddled in her chair, like a punished child. "Why? Why would a thing like that be done?"

"This is your world, Martha. It isn't ours."

She laughed wildly. "Oh, come now! Tell me about the Martians. Show me your space-ships!"

"You'll have a chance to see them but they won't come from your Mars," Massio said. "They'll come from Strada." He laid his hand down on the table palm down. "Strada," he said. He flipped it over. "And Earth. Peculiarly enough we seem to be very close neighbors of yours. But we have found our way through."

She stood up and her chair fell over. "I'm going and—tell everyone."

Quinn smiled. "From what I have learned of this place, Martha, they would just lock you up. And if anyone should come to investigate we are a chemist and his wife on vacation with a house guest. They can take our fingerprints. They'll match, you know. I think you'd best go inside and lie down."

She walked into the house like a wooden doll. She had wanted to walk around to the cars but her footsteps carried her inside the house, into the bedroom, over to the bed. Amro stood up. "Watch her," he said. "It's time I reported on last night."

The dark oblong formed in the sunlight as he reached it. Without altering his stride he walked through it and was gone.

Drael glanced at Massio. "He is an odd one."

"He wasn't until he came here. Now he is very—odd. He says strange things. We talked last night. He talked treason to me, pausing every few minutes to say that it was just speculation, of course. Just idle talk."

"Tell me what he said."

Massio shrugged. "That it is possible that the conflict between the

League and the Center is pointless. That the individual is important. That power might be a myth. Is that enough?"

"More than enough!"

"This Earthgirl fascinates him. She has misled him. He smashed Faven's mind because Faven wanted to hurt the girl. Amro has turned weak. And so I reported him last night after we talked. I don't think he'll be back."

"Will you be in charge here?"

"I think so."

"What will you do about the girl? If they don't want attention attracted to this place she could be a problem."

"Right. She can't disappear and she can't be killed. That's where Faven was in error. But there is a better and an easier way. In her mental condition a much easier way."

Drael smiled. "Clever, Massio! And so obvious that I didn't guess it. Take her to their nearest town and break her mind as you release her."

"It disturbs me," he said, "that this thing could happen to Amro."

"I have heard of similar instances. One of the female agents brought in at the same time I was, tried to desert the League. The man she was covering caught her fancy."

"What did they do to her?" Massio asked.

"They solved it neatly by getting the right sort of information to the man in question and then permitting her to desert. She couldn't make him believe her, of course. Quite a disappointing way to die, I should say."

VI

AMRO and Lofta stood before the Chief. He appeared to pay little attention to Lofta's report. When Lofta had finished, the Chief said, "Go. Leave the agent here with me."

"But I—" The Chief gave Lofta a long, frosty look. Lofta left hurriedly.

"Sit down, Amro."

The Chief paced back and forth. "You are an intelligent man, Amro. What do you suspect is going to happen to you?"

"I'll be relieved of the present operation and subjected to the mental adjustment test. Then I'll be killed."

"You seem pretty certain of the results of the test, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you wonder why I am wasting my time with a condemned agent."

"Yes, sir."

The Chief sat down. "This woman—this Faven. Our records indicate that she was effective and reliable."

"I believe she was."

"You spoiled her quite thoroughly, Amro."

"I was angry with her. She was not willing to accept me as the appointed leader of the three of us."

"And of course she meant harm to the Earthgirl."

"That was the important thing in my mind at the time."

"Thank you for your honesty, Amro."

"There hardly seems to be much point in being dishonest. I— I've known, somehow, that this would happen."

"When did you start to know?"

"After I had many talks with the Earthgirl. Their way of thought is not like ours. At first I was interested because there seemed to be so little point in it. I tried to find out why they are the way they are, thinking that if I could find the reason it would be of help to us in keeping the population quiet later.

"Their histories show that the males are willing to die for principle even on the side of an obviously lost cause. Since this is new to us I wanted to get more information on what makes them that way."

"And you found out?"

Amro looked steadily at the Chief. "I found out that in my own mind I am as important as you—or as unimportant. You will order my life taken

but you have no real right to do so. And if I found that I could kill you this moment I wouldn't attempt to. I learned that very recently. But if I were certain by killing you I could gain something for this idea of individual equality you would be drawing your last breath."

Indeed," the Chief said softly. "I confess that these strange ideas of yours are quite new to me—quite new. And suppose we decide that the individual is important. What then? It seems to be an empty concept."

"If we decided, yes. But if we decided and the League decided to follow the philosophy would not the importance of the individuals on any planet—the little people we have ignored—be such that neither the League nor the Center would bring to bear any weapons which would destroy the planet or any major part of it?"

"Continue."

"And if that fact were recognized by both sides wouldn't we soon see the foolishness of continuing on the basis of assassination, since the only purpose in that has been to gain such an edge that it would be safe to bring major weapons to bear?"

"And the last step?"

"If violence can no longer be used, then we can only proceed by non-violent means. By discussion, debate, compromise. And that means that you and I, equally important or unimportant people, can walk on the streets of any city.

"I haven't walked on city streets since I was a child, not until I went to the twin world. You might go there, sir. You might find it curiously interesting to walk among the others."

"But," the Chief asked softly, "haven't we gone too far along a particular path to attempt to change now?"

"Yes, sir. But maybe some time it will be different."

"But you won't see it," the Chief said.

"I know that. And I would die to bring that day closer, even knowing that I will never see it."

The Chief made an abrupt change in the conversation. "They have wars there, I believe."

"They do. But in more than half the nation there are men who hold this belief about the rights of the individual and who want all problems settled without the use of force."

"And what will happen to this twin world, Amro?"

"They'll put up a hopeless fight. In the end it will be ours."

"I am giving Lofta orders to have you held. You will speak to no one."

"Yes, sir."

JAKE INGRAM explained who he was. He said, "I heard you people were here on some kind of a special case and I don't have enough to go on to call you in but just something funny I want to talk over."

The two F.B.I. men were young and dark haired, with curiously expressionless faces and the general appearance of bank tellers.

"Sit down," the taller one said.

"I'll take it right from the beginning," Jake said, sitting down and pulling out his notebook. "This girl from New York named Martha Kaynan came in and reported . . ." His voice droned on and on in the small office. ". . . and then, without knowing how I got there, I was in my car and on the outskirts of Port Isabel."

"Sun pretty hot?" the taller one said.

Jake gave him a shamefaced smile. "Thought the same thing myself. But it bothered me. I know the roads in that section pretty well. So after I thought it over for a time I stopped in the office and picked up some good eight-power binoculars.

"I took a farm road and left the car and walked across through the scrub and wormed up as close as I could to see what I could see. I'd say I was about a hundred and fifty yards southwest of the house. With the glasses that

made 'em look about fifty feet away and I could see good.

"They ate outside. There was some kind of argument going on. The Kaynan girl went into the house. The tall one, French, left the table and walked out on the sea side of the house, just like he was going someplace special. He walked along and I held the glasses on him. A big dark oblong sprang up right in front of him.

"And this French, he walked right through it and he was gone. I took a quick look without the glasses to make sure he hadn't walked out of the field of vision but he hadn't. That beach was just as empty as the top of this table. I know what you're thinking but you're wrong, I saw it."

"And then what did you do, Ingram?"

"It didn't make me feel too good but I kept watching. Pretty soon Mr. Raymond went swimming and his wife went in the house with the Kaynan girl. I watched him wade out and dive in. And he didn't come up. He didn't come up at all. I waited and I'd say it was five minutes later he came up about two hundred yards out."

"Was the sun in your eyes?"

"It was behind me. I could see good. He played around out there and then he headed for shore. A man just can't swim as fast as that fella did. The spray flew up ten feet in the air. He came out of that water at a dead run, and I mean he was moving.

"Now you people can take it or leave it. I've given you the dope. It's off my chest. Something very damn funny is going on out there and to tell you the truth I just don't want another damn thing to do with it."

"Why did you come to us?"

"I just don't think those people there are human. If they aren't human, then they come from some other place. Hell or Mars or the Moon. And if they do, that's your problem, boys. Not mine."

"Are you making this report officially?"

"Any way you want to make it."

The tall one said, "So far there's no violation of any federal statute. We're winding up a case here. I'll request permission to go take a look. Ingram, I've heard weird ones but your yarn—if you weren't a police officer I'd have the little men with the nets out looking for you."

"Wouldn't blame you a bit," Jake said. "If you can take time off right now, I could drive you out there. Take about an hour from here, and then you'd know how to get to where you can watch them."

The taller one reached for his hat and said, "Let's go."

* * *

The door had been sealed shut. Amro lay on his back on the cot in the tiny windowless room, trying to amuse himself by opening his mind to the most extreme limits of receptivity. Through the thickness of the walls he could catch random fleeting impressions. Somewhere far above him there was tension. It took him a long time to find out that it was the concentrated emotion of a whole phalanx of clerks working against a report deadline.

A tangle of thoughts and emotions moved slowly closer and he knew that someone was walking down the corridor, passing the sealed door. The thoughts were vaguely of strategy and intrigue, of move and counter-move, and he guessed that it was one of the monitors. He tried to find out who and felt the mind snap shut against his probe, exuding an acid aura of indignation and outraged privacy.

A bit later there was an agent passing and Amro sensed the blood-thirst in that mind, the direct and uncomplicated pleasure in anticipating the job for which the organism had been trained.

And it made him feel the extent of the change in himself. It made him think of Martha Kaynan.

They had taken the Earth clothes from him, had given him back the short kilt but with weapons pockets empty. He thought of Martha and what they might do to her and he paced back and forth by the sealed door, his fingernails biting into his palms, a sound oddly like a growl in his throat.

But even as he paced he knew his own helplessness. Even if he could force the door with his hands the doorway to the twin world was five levels below him. He would have to get by the normal complement of corridor guards, probably three between him and the steep ramp. Two guards on each level at the ramp landings. That would make eleven.

Then probably five more at intervals along the corridor leading to the area where the negative matter, the pattern of unreality, provided the exit to the twin world. There were two agents on duty at that place, controlling the switch. Sixteen guards and two agents. Eighteen armed men. No combination of luck and agility could carry him that far.

He went back to the cot and forced relaxation on his muscles. It was odd, he thought, about the Chief. The strange attitude he had taken. And equally odd that he had not yet been taken away for the test.

Maybe when they came for him... It was hard to break the established pattern of obedience to the Center, of dedication. They would expect cooperation when they came for him. And it it was possible that he could provide them with a surprise.

* * *

The house was very still. She lay and listened for a long time and all she could hear was the soft sighs of the sea, sometimes the thin crackling of sand blown against the house.

Quinn had not come back. No, it was a mistake to keep thinking of him as Quinn. Quinn French was dead. The three of them had told her he was dead. And Fran was dead.

It made it worse that Quinn hadn't come back, even though she knew that he was one of them—one of the dreadful aliens. How stupid not to have seen it from the beginning! But what chance did a human have of detecting the nonhuman?

She guessed that a small child would have known almost immediately. Children are quick to feel strangeness. It is the adults, trained in skepticism, who see with blind eyes. Adults search for reasons. Children merely know.

Why be afraid because the creature horribly masquerading as Quinn has gone? Maybe because it was possible to sense the growth of compassion in him.

They looked like humans. They could make themselves look like humans. She knew that they would continue to fool the humans until they had won. And then probably it would be safe for them to resume their own guise. How would they look? Dreadful slimed sea-depths things? Or scaled, and coiled? Alien and horrible.

She wondered if it were some trick of light that made them able to look like people. No, not the light alone. There had been that moment on the beach when the thing calling itself Quinn had kissed her. They had felt like human lips and his arms like human arms. But too strong, of course. So strong that her mouth was bruised.

Now? No, not quite yet. She felt his name on her lips. "Quinn!"

They had admitted it! They had told her!

Or was all this another facet of madness? The family had always spoken in careful casual ways about Aunt Harriet. No, Aunt Harriet hadn't been a blood relative. No point in thinking along those lines. But remember Alice at school? What was her name?

Alice Masters, Masterson, Mathews, Mathewson—Mathers! That was it—

Alice Mathers. Perfectly all right and then they found her all curled up in the fireplace with the ashes she had rubbed into her hair and all over her face, laughing and talking up the chimney, answering questions to a voice they couldn't hear.

NO, THIS wasn't like that at all. It *couldn't* be! But didn't all the crazy people claim they are perfectly sane? It's only when you recognize the possibility of your being whacked that you aren't.

Now? Try now, Martha—carefully, slowly, three steps to the door. Stand and wait. No moon tonight. Dress? Don't take the time. Breathe softly, slowly. The pounding of the heart will wake them surely. A Congo drum. Slowly—*There!* Now you can see the door, that dim oblong. One, two three, four steps. Reach out. Touch the screen. Now all you have to do is push it open slowly and...

"Go back to your bed!" Fran said.

Martha held both hands tightly against her mouth. She turned without a word and went back to her bed.

* * *

The Chief stood again with his arms crossed and looked across the black void to the misty dot of light that was Strada. After he had listened to that agent, Amro, he had felt that it was time to be alone, to think long careful thoughts. And so he had come at once to the asteroid.

Back on Strada the problem was too close. It surrounded and smothered him. It echoed in the corridors, chattered in the billion upon billion of electronic relays in the calculators and computers. Five hundred and sixty-one planets dependent on Strada. Ceaseless flow of orders. Move the exploration crews to sector fourteen hundred ten.

Eight hundred tons of Compound Seven to Planet 6003-11—Emergency. Two hundred thousand Stradai awaiting passage to 6118-?b. Conduct search for missing freighter in sector thirteen hundred seventy. Send specialists to 6202-?c to determine cause of resistance to atmospheric envelope. Send food at once. Send hate. Send envy. Send death.

Strada—nerve center. Brain and head—record center of plans, inventories, census, secret agents of League and Center. Loyalty records.

And what if the beast was headless? No food, no specialists, no transportation for those who waited. Five hundred and sixty-one orphaned planet children, rapidly growing unkempt, thrust into freedom.

"What then?" he said aloud.

One could guess. Endless and crippling confusion as each planet slowly strove for self-sufficiency, staggering under continually increasing burden of population. The ancient adjustments—famine, disease and war. Each planet busily scrubbing its own laundry, then at last, home task completed, turning to stare avidly at other worlds.

In the struggle some of them would lose the knack, the skill, for space travel. They might go for generations, never visited. The language slowly changing, even the physical form of the Stradai changing, once limited to the specific planet, to a specific set of environmental influences. Then vast combines and wars and empires rising and falling.

An enormous setback to the unified efficient Stradian civilization. Or, he thought, could it *really* be called a setback. It was rumored that there had once been a golden age before the Stradai had lifted themselves from the surface of their home planet. But the histories had been lost, of course. What had the Stradai believed in then?

Slowly the plan was forming itself in his mind and he knew that it was either wisdom—or the most foul stupidity. And he knew that somehow he would carry it through.

Then he went back to the port and

into the tunnel and shut himself in the small craft. The large port behind him opened and the imprisoned air gouted out. The craft moved backward, scraping at first and then lifting free of the tunnel floor as it crossed into the ungravitated area.

He emerged on manual control, turned slowly and set the control table for the proper oscillation, cutting into his own headquarters frequently with a rough disregard for his own comfort. Acceleration stood with leaden feet on his chest and thumbed back his eyes and plunged a gnarled fist into his belly. And then it eased off.

On the tenth minute of his trip a space-worn freighter blundered up out of the atmosphere of Strada, too common a ship to warrant more than a glance from the guard crew who had already plotted their Chief's course and time of arrival.

On the seventy-third minute of his trip the Chief stopped daydreaming and gasped as the collision screen showed him that some blind fool of a freighter pilot was staggering into an interception course.

As his hand flicked out to make the shift from automatic to manual he felt the motor nerves deaden. His hand touched the edge of the control table, lay there. The utmost power of his will could not move it. He sat forward in the seat, able to change the focus but not the direction of his eyes. Fear was suddenly gone in his savage appreciation of the wryness of the jest.

VII

THE woman came to the door of the room and stared at Martha. "Get up."

"What are you going to do to me?"

Martha saw the slight narrowing of the woman's eyes and she immediately concentrated on making as clear as possible her mental image of the wall. She was barely in time. She felt the thrust press against the wall, fade away.

"He was a fool to teach you that," the woman said.

"What are you going to do to me?"

"You are not going to be harmed, Martha. After breakfast we will all drive into Harlingen. We want you to be seen with us. And then we're coming back here."

"I don't believe you."

"What good will it do for you to believe or disbelieve? Get up. Stop being a child."

Martha slowly got out of bed. The woman stood and watched her.

"Only the sickest ones among us are as weak as you Earth-people. I could break your back with my hands."

"That must make you very proud and happy."

"I am proud and happy to be what I am."

Martha pulled her dress down over her head, closed the zipper at the waist. She turned and smiled at the woman. "What are you really? When you aren't going around looking like what you aren't? Some horrid thing with eight legs and large leathery wings?"

"At least you have imagination of a sort."

"Oh, thank you," Martha said bitterly.

"Use it while you can, my dear," the woman said softly.

The words set a cold knot of fear growing in Martha's heart. "What—do—you—mean?"

"Please hurry. You are to prepare food for the three of us."

"Where's Quinn?"

"We told you Quinn's dead."

"You know who I mean. The other one."

"His name is Amro—*was* Amro. For I am quite sure that he is dead by now also. What is the matter? You look ill. Don't tell me that you feel anything but hate for any of us. Haven't you wondered what Amro might really look like?"

"Yes. But I don't care. He isn't like you and—and the other one out there.

He's more like us. He's harder and colder and crueler than we are, I know. But he's more like us than you are."

The woman smiled. "Please understand that I am only amusing myself by talking to you. You could no more affect me by your good or bad opinion than you could be similarly affected by a stray kitten on the street. Our race is so far superior to yours in every way that I have the utmost difficulty in trying to consider you a rational creature. Fasten your ridiculous clothing and go to the kitchen."

"Did you ever wonder if it was possibly that you might be the *inferior* race? Creatures from a sort of second-rate civilization?"

"Is that the sort of thing you told Amro?"

"It might be."

"Then poor Amro must have been very unstable when he was sent on this operation." The woman reached out quickly and took Martha's wrist. She smiled and slowly increased the pressure until Martha felt the thin grating of the bones. She cried out, despising her own weakness.

"Now be obedient," the woman said.

* * *

Though unable to move he was completely conscious as his small craft was drawn into the belly of the freighter. He saw a glistening flash from the corner of his eye and guessed that it was the substitute being sent out in the identical type of craft. Even trapped as he was he was forced to admire the timing and cleverness of the operation.

They had de-accelerated him so recklessly that it had broken the webbing and thrown him against the table. He could feel the runlet of blood on his cheek.

Endless helpless minutes passed and then he was moved, still inside his craft, into another hull. Then he was in darkness. Through the hull of his own tiny ship he heard the rising whine of the ship enclosing him and he knew that it was fast—very fast.

And, helpless in the darkness, he began to plan once more—this time with even greater care.

SOMEHOW they had got on a first name basis during the long vigil. The taller one was named Henry and his co-worker was Will. They called him Jake when their questions were casual, Ingram when they were of a more serious nature.

Both Jake and Henry held glasses on the house. The position of the sun put a harsh glare on the water which reflected back at them.

"There they are!" Jake said in a husky whisper, forgetting that the sound of the waves would keep them from hearing anything short of a shout.

They had appeared at the north end of the house, walking diagonally over toward the two cars. The taller woman with black hair wore a pale blue baremidriff dress. Martha Kaynan wore a yellow print dress and sandals. The man wore slacks and a sport shirt.

They were walking slowly and the tall woman appeared to be talking to the man. Jake silently cursed, knowing how ordinary they must look to his two new friends.

"The big man isn't there any more," Jake said. "I got a hunch he isn't inside either."

"Watch this!" Henry said. The smaller woman had lagged behind. Suddenly she turned and began to sprint down the beach.

"She doesn't go so fast," Will said.

"I told you she isn't one of the funny-acting ones."

The other two made no attempt at pursuit. They turned and calmly watched Martha. The girl stumbled and fell headlong. She got up slowly and turned and walked back toward the other two.

"Look how she's walking," Henry said.

"Just find me an answer," Jake

said, "to why she runs up the beach like she was scared out of her wits and then walks back."

"Maybe she's a little off upstairs," Henry suggested in a soft tone.

"I talked to her. I don't think so."

"She came back of her own free will," Henry said. "I don't see how we have anything to go on, Ingram."

"I wish he'd pull something fancy so you could see him," Jake mumbled.

It happened as though in answer to Jake's request. The convertible was parked on the other side of the sedan. The two women walked around the back of the sedan. The man took two quick running steps and vaulted the sedan, not making a close thing of it but arching up and over and down with ample room to spare.

"Mother O'Reilly!" Henry gasped.

"See?" Jake said triumphantly. "I read a book on logic once. A guy tells you a crazy story and then if he proves one part of it you've got to give him odds on the rest of it panning out."

Will cursed softly and monotonously. Henry still wore a dazed look.

"Well, are you going after 'em?" Jake demanded.

"I'll compromise," Henry said. "Let's get back to the cars and tail them."

"We'll have to make it fast. We've got a longer distance to go," Jake said. "We can pick them up at the fork this side of Port Isabel."

* * *

He lay where they had thrown him, the rug soft under his cheek. He felt the volition returning to nerve and muscle. At first it was but an intensification of the feeling of weakness, and then a rising strength. He stood up then, shrugging the toga of rank into the proper position on his shoulders, wiping the crust of blood from his cheek, smoothing his gray hair back with his fingers.

The room was small. He saw the two of them sitting there, side by side, facing him. Their expressions were gloating. A puffy old man with traces of waning strength in the set of his jaw. An old woman who trembled constantly.

He knew how he looked to them. A small weary nondescript man—whose time had run out. His mind was racing, selecting, discarding, sorting.

To be forced to stand was a disadvantage. He moved back and leaned against the wall, folding his arms in his habitual posture. He made himself smile casually.

"Greetings, Dolpha—and you, Renaen." He gave them a small, ironic bow. "If you had found the opening I would have had the pleasure of meeting your friend Kama. But we grew tired of waiting for you to take me."

The old man's face purpled. "You, sir, are not supposed to be that well acquainted with the innermost organization of the League."

"Oh but I am. I know many things. I know that there is a wall between us, and so I shall not make a fool of myself by walking into it."

RENAEN pulled at her chin. She said, "You made Dolpha so angry that he missed the point you made. You speak as though it were planned that we should capture you in the way we did. Isn't that rather a poor bluff? You seek to make us uncertain of ourselves and thus gain the advantage. Isn't that correct?"

"The fact that I wasn't killed at once indicates to me that you were uncertain about many things before you put your plan into effect. And we have been so certain of your uncertainty that I was willing to take the risk." He gave his words a quiet confidence. He was rewarded by the look in their eyes.

Dolpha's eyes narrowed. "All right, sir. Suppose, just to amuse the two of us, we accept the premise. That it was your desire to be taken captive. That would indicate that you wish to speak about something."

"I did wish to. Now that I've seen

the two of you, I wonder if it is worth while. You showed a certain amount of intelligence in risking having me brought to Strada but that may be just senile shrewdness."

"There are ways that you can pay for insults," Renaen said shrilly.

He laughed. "I hardly think so. You must have X-rayed me. And the pellet put torture out of date before any of us were born."

"We have ways of making it ineffective," Renaen said.

Again he laughed. "Oh, come now! We are wasting time. And you will be surprised at how little time there is left. You have one fairly competent man here—Rellovo. I want to state a concept and a few formulae to him. Then you can test his reaction. Send for him."

"Can you give us orders?"

"Can you afford to pass up the chance of learning how the Center has finally won?"

The cold confidence and finality of that statement staggered the two of them. He could see that. The wall between them became suddenly opaque. He waited patiently. When it cleared again Rellovo stood behind them.

The Chief stated crisply the reasoning behind the formulae, the formulae themselves and the result. He watched Rellovo's face as he talked, seeing first the doubt, then the high excitement of the scientific mind, then the staring fear as he suddenly realized that it was in the hands of the enemy.

"Well?" Dolpha said.

"It—it sounds convincing," Rellovo stammered. "There would have to be tests made—we know a little about the nature of negative matter—I would have to think about it and—"

"But there's no time for thinking," the Chief said. "We went through that doorway some time ago. And we've been taken into that adjoining world. Installations have been constructed. You cannot attack us there. But we can emerge at any time at any place on this planet and smash you."

"Could this be true?" Dolpha yelled at Rellovo.

"On one hand, it would appear that—"

"Don't write me a text! Could it be true? Is it possible!"

"Yes, sir."

SUDDENLY the fear went out of Dolpha's rheumy eyes. He leaned back in his chair and said softly, "Very clever. For a moment your bluff came close to working. But there is one question you can't answer. If it is true why haven't you struck?"

"Very simple. We are too closely interwoven here. We can't hurt you without hurting some of our own installations and if you were desperate enough you might attempt quite successfully to destroy the whole planet. The Center needs Strada as the administrative system. Now that victory is so easy there is no point at all in hunting you down and wiping you out. Too much trouble. Just give up."

"And if we don't?"

"One hour and—let me see. One hour and forty-one minutes from now this structure will have suffered a slight change. Some of it will be dust, heading toward the stratosphere, and the rest of it should be a fairly large molten pool.

"Every other principal League installation on Strada will suffer the same consequences. The entire attack has been coordinated on an automatic basis and it is now controlled by a timing device in my headquarters. The timing device is so adjusted that no one can disengage it but myself." He saw Rellovo bend over to whisper in Dolpha's ear.

He said more loudly, "Naturally the destruction of my headquarters would set the entire affair off a bit prematurely."

Rellovo straightened up, his face white, his mouth working. "We can arrange to strike back," Renaen said. "In fact, it—"

"—it is already arranged, I know,"

the Chief said, "and has been for a long time. We haven't underestimated you. We both have had a knife at each others' throat for many years. But it now happens that our knife is sharper."

"If we hold you here," Dolpha said, "you die with us."

The Chief shrugged. "Why not? I would say that my work is over. They can call me the man who defeated the League. When I permitted you to capture me I was taking that chance. One hour and thirty-six minutes now."

Once again the wall became opaque. He let out his breath in a long shuddering sigh. So far it had gone well. The minutes went by. Fear grew in him, fear that they had sensed the bluff, had decided to wait until the designated time.

The wall cleared. Dolpha sat alone. The other chair was empty. And there was a tiny smear of blood on the arm of it.

"Now there is only one of us to deal with," Dolpha said. "She had passed her usefulness to the League. I have been in touch with the others. They will abide by my decision. I see no reason why the League, recognizing the Center as the ultimate authority, cannot continue to function on a dependent basis.

"Our organization is already set up to handle troublesome administrative details, thus taking them off your hands. Naturally both the Center and the League can disband all agent organizations. I promise complete capitulation."

The Chief gave him an ironic smile. "You will not disband your agent organizations only to start newer more secret ones?"

"Why, of course not!" said Dolpha.

"And you will not set up any experiment to develop a mode of egress to the twin world?"

Dolpha gave a slight bow. "The League will have enough to do handling routine administrative work. Science is the province of the Center. Now let us arrange your passage back to your own headquarters so that you can deactivate that timing device. The thought of it ticking on and on makes me very nervous."

"You trust me, eh?" the Chief asked.

"Of course—of course. There seems to be one hour and sixteen minutes left. Transportation has been arranged for you. You will arrive safely at your headquarters when there is exactly fifty-nine minutes left. It should not take you over thirty minutes to establish your correct identity and five minutes to reach the device. We shall expect that as soon as you have deactivated it you will advise us through official channels.

"If we do not hear from you and have not heard from you exactly five minutes before the time you stated we shall launch our own attack on all Center installations. And should you attack first, please understand that your attack, even if all League installations are destroyed, will do nothing to diminish the force of our retaliation."

"I understand."

"Then go through the door on your left. It is now unlocked. Follow the guard detail."

The Chief arrived, as Dolpha had said, when there were but fifty-nine minutes left of the entirely imaginary period. As the substitute had been detected and killed minutes after the duplicate craft had landed identification took but ten minutes.

He brushed off any attempt at questioning and went immediately to his headquarters. He had been able to act assured because the timing device was there and had been there for over two years. But it had never been connected.

He proceeded to connect it. It was dizzying to think of the multiplicity of automatic weapons of death and destruction which lay, brooding and silent, wanting for the tiny impulse. With the most infinite care he set it to coincide with the exact minute at which Dolpha had promised, if word didn't come, to

unleash the equally potent hell that the League had labored so long to perfect. And then he prayed to the rumored gods of the long-forgotten golden age of the Stradai.

VIII

THE convertible went slowly through the outskirts of Harlingen, the government sedan a half block behind it, Jake close behind the government sedan.

They had confined their plan to Jake and he was faintly and uncomfortably skeptical about it. The only advantage it had was its quality of innocuousness. If there was nothing at all peculiar about the trio, two supposed field men from the Bureau of Internal Revenue asking questions about the whereabouts of Quinn French would not alarm them. But the uneasiness within Jake persisted. The flaw in the idea was to his way of thinking the lack of a second line of defense. He vowed that he would stay close, but not too close.

The convertible turned right near the hotel, paused for the light while the government sedan idled along in its wake. A half block beyond the light it pulled in to the curb where diagonal parking was permitted. The government sedan picked a neighboring empty slot. Jake found a hole five or six cars away and was out as soon as he had cut the motor, not very comforted by the weight of the .38 special.

The Raymonds and the Kaynan girl got out of the convertible. Jake saw that the Kaynan girl looked sick and dizzy. Henry and Will moved in casually and the trio became a quintet, a casual conversation group on the sun-hot sidewalk of the small Texas city.

It was all so casual and so ordinary that Jake slowly relaxed the muscles of his right arm, ready to take his sweaty palm from the revolver grip.

Then Henry turned visibly pale and took two wooden steps backward. At the same moment Martha Kaynan, half crouching as though expecting a blow from behind, scuttled down the sidewalk toward where Jake stood, half concealed by the parked cars.

Jake was indecisive but then he saw the naked terror on the Kaynan girl's face. It was as though for one moment he had been permitted to look down into a hell of fear so vast as to be barely comprehended. And the result was to immediately inflame him with a hate and detestation of those two who stood facing down the two FBI agents.

The woman turned and Jake saw the fury on her face, the narrowed blazing eyes as she stared after Martha. Martha fell and rolled on the sidewalk, scraping her knees and elbows, her head hitting with a small dismal thud.

Jake felt an arrow of pain sizzling behind the sturdy bone of his forehead and he crouched, pulling the special clear of the holster. He saw Will, falling backward, his face still contorted, rip out his own gun, aim it with a wavering hand.

Mr. Raymond reached inside the sport shirt and his hand reappeared. In it he held a small powder blue tube, as ridiculous as a child's beanshooter. Jake clamped his teeth hard on the pain and took careful aim for a shoulder of Mr. Raymond. Raymond fired first. Jake only knew that he fired by the effect on Will.

There was no sound of explosion, no visible flash. A ragged hole the size of a basketball appeared in the center of Will's chest and, as he slid over backward, Jake, for an incredulous fraction of a second, could see through Will, could see the pale stone wall beyond him.

He squeezed down on the trigger, knowing as the shot kicked off that he was a tiny bit high for a shoulder shot. But he was unprepared for the result. Jake had been Navy. The nearest thing to it in his experience was a forty millimeter H.E. The top half of Mr. Raymond detonated with a *crack-thoom* that shook the street.

After it came the drip and tinkle of broken glass, the distant plaintive cries of frightened women, the bellows of alarmed men, the scream and crash of nearby traffic accidents.

The sound of Henry's shot was feeble by comparison, a flat empty snap that sounded like a pistol, but the woman staggered and fell with a spreading redness on the hem of her blue skirt.

Just as Jake began to feel that maybe it was ended, just as he began to suck in the deep breath of relief, the writhing woman on the sidewalk began to scream in a strange tongue. And an enormous invisible whiplash flailed the air. It whined without sound, crisscrossing, flicking, stinging. It cracked against Jake's mind and he bounced off the fender of his own car as he fell.

People a half block away dropped to their knees and hugged their heads and moaned. A car ran up over the sidewalk on the other side of the street and smashed through the plate glass window of a supermarket. Jake lay panting for a moment and started to struggle up. The impact against his mind smashed him flat again and he gagged.

He rolled onto his stomach and, looking under the car, he saw the woman slowly crawling toward the convertible. Beyond her Henry lay helpless, blood on his chin from his chewed lip. Those who had come running to the source of the explosion lay on the sidewalk, moving weakly, trying to stand, then dropping again as the whistling lash of power hit them.

The woman had stopped screaming in her peculiar language. Martha lay huddled and silent.

Jake Ingram was a stubborn man with an exceptional capacity for anger. Five times he tried to center his sights on her and each time the enervating blast thudded the gun back against the asphalt. But the sixth time he was given a fractional part of a second and he pulled the trigger before the mind-whip was due to return. He could drive a nail at thirty paces. She was ten paces away and a woman's head is considerably larger than a nail.

The second massive detonation came. From the waist down she was intact. The rest of her had ceased to exist. There was a pinkish spray on the side of the building, an enormous dished cavity in the door of the convertible. The street was once again at peace.

The people slowly got to their feet. They wore dazed expressions. They licked dry lips and their eyes rolled. Henry sat up, wiped his mouth, stared at Will and began to curse. Jake walked over and picked Martha up. Her eyes opened wide and she struggled.

"It's all over, baby," Jake said thickly. "All over. Cry if you want to."

AMRO came to his feet as he sensed the presence outside his door. The mind exuded an odd effluvium of triumph and peace. He stood, awaiting the known fate, as the door was unsealed. It swung open and he saw the Chief standing in the corridor. The Chief's eyes were odd. For a moment Amro couldn't understand. Then he remembered having seen children cry. He had never seen a man cry.

The guard, standing at attention in respect for the toga of rank, said, "The orders from Lorta were that the prisoner is to be—"

"I countermand his orders. Amro will come with me."

Amro walked slowly out of the room, faking calmness, his senses alert, waiting for any chance, no matter how remote.

"Walk beside me," the Chief said.

Amro did so. The Chief said when they were out of earshot of the guard, "Do not attempt an escape, Amro. I am helping you."

"What sort of a trick is this?"

"No trick. You told me once that it would be good if I were to walk in the streets of the twin world. And there isn't much time. I'd like to try it."

"What do you mean—not much time?"

"Don't question me, Amro."

They walked past the corridor guards and the Chief took their salutes without response. Amro saw that the guards looked uncertain. He sensed that they were on the verge of objecting. There was a small cold spot in the small of his back as he passed each of them.

The Chief walked too slowly, he thought. He walked like a man in a strange dream. They reached the ramp and started down. "You will show me the twin world, Amro," the Chief said. His voice was gentle.

"So you can plan to spoil it."

"Do you think so?"

"What other reason would you have?"

"That's right. What other reason would I have?"

On the third landing the guard said, "You cannot pass below this level. No one can pass unless I am told by Lofta to permit it."

The Chief lost his odd lethargic manner. He straightened and his lips grew thin. His palm cracked off the guard's cheek. "Take that to Lofta with my compliments. Stand aside."

The guard hesitated, licked his lips. His cheek was red. He saluted and stood aside. They continued down the ramp.

Hope grew slowly in Amro. Free on Earth he would have a chance. Maybe, if the Earthpeople could be made to believe him, he could help them fight against this thing, this doorway. It would be a losing fight but a good one. For the first time in his life he sensed that something was worth fighting for.

They reached the last corridor, the ground level corridor stretching to where, at the very end, two agents guarded the switch which controlled the exit to Earth. They studied with interest the two who approached.

"Open the doorway," the Chief said. It was a tone heavy with the custom of years of command, which did not admit of any possibility of disobedience.

An agent dutifully turned and threw the switch. The blank end of the corridor was suddenly darker than any night. The other agent moved into the center of the corridor. "You'll wait for Lofta to send orders," he said.

The Chief was mild. "You know who I am?"

"Of course. But I have known of other agents tested in this manner. And so I shall follow my orders." The deadly blue tube appeared in his hand.

"You would even kill me?"

"Yes, sir. I would kill you should you try to pass me."

The black doorway was so near. Amro moved a bit to one side. The blue muzzle flicked in his direction and the agent said, "You have no chance, you see."

It began as a deep heavy vibration, a trembling that was transmitted from the corridor floor to legs and skull. Amro looked quickly at the Chief. The smaller man's head was cocked to one side and he wore the look of one who listens carefully.

"What is that?" the agent demanded.

"You could call it the end of the world," the Chief said. And then, almost to himself, "The Center strikes first."

The vibration became deeper and stronger as though the crust of Strada quivered on the jellied rock underneath. A far-off rumble, like the sound of heavy machines, slowly climbed up through the octaves to a roar, a drone, a whine, a rising, unbearable scream. The whole corridor shook violently, throwing them off their feet. Bits of the wall flaked off, dropped on them as they tried to rise.

And then it was as though a giant's hands grasped the far end of the corridor floor, snapping it like a rug. A section of the roof fell in yards behind them and the white heat slanted through the opening, destroying vision, crisping exposed skin.

Amro struggled to his feet, getting

his balance, remaining upright despite the spasms of the corridor floor which lifted him into the air. One of the agents lay still. The other, thinking blindly of duty even at the obvious end, clawed his way up toward the switch.

His hand was inches from it as Amro plunged toward the black doorway. He thought in mid-stride that he was too late. The whole corridor tilted over at a crazy angle as he lunged through the blackness. There was a great pain in his legs and he tumbled over and over.

THEY had stood and watched the oblong of blackness which had so startlingly appeared on the sunlit beach. Henry had raced to the sedan and ordered that a fifty-caliber Browning with a field mount be borrowed from the National Guard arsenal and rushed out to the beach. He returned and stood beside Jake and the others, gun drawn, waiting for what might come out of the blackness.

Jake stood with cold sweat running down his ribs. Martha stood a little behind and twice he turned and told her to take shelter behind the cars. She appeared not to hear him.

Henry said, "If we get time to get that gun set up we can pepper the hell out of anything that tries to come through."

Jake nodded, sensing the hollowness of Henry's confidence. It matched his own. He was certain that Henry knew something could come out of there that would make the machine gun as effective as throwing wild rice at armor plate. But all you can do is try.

All you can do is stand and think of how neat and explicable everything was until all of a sudden you found out that other beings aren't going to come from the distant stars sometime in the unknown future—but out of an obscene blackness right in your own backyard, here and now. And then you know that no matter what you do you aren't ready for them—never were—never will be.

The afternoon radio programs were on, the Texas disc jockeys featuring slightly nasal lonesome cowhands. A commentator was speaking in stern voice of the latest Russian veto and in Cape Canaveral they were readying another big one of the booster type, proud of their knowledge, not knowing how feeble and primitive it was. There was unrest on Hawaiian docks and critical acclaim for the new Brando epic and a novelist's anatomical details banned in Boston . . .

But here, with the sand yellow-white in the sun, with the porpoises playing in the green water a thousand yards out, with a crab scuttling down toward the breakers, a knot of men and a quiet girl watched the deep and impossible blackness with all the forlorn courage of a Neanderthal village attacking a tank column. Here was the end of a world and its color was black.

Surprise froze them as the figure came tumbling out of the blackness, rolling over and over in the sand. Jake was the first to respond, snap-shooting, the slug kicking up sand near a brown shoulder—and then Martha was in front of him, right in the line of fire, screaming, *"No, don't!"* as she ran toward the figure on the sand.

The black oblong had canted over to a strange angle, a rectangle standing on one point. With a roar that covered the sound of the sea, with a long upreaching tongue of white flame that dimmed the sun, the oblong disappeared.

The man lay still. Jake recognized him as Quinn French. He said, "Get out of the way and I'll give him one in the head. I can see him breathing."

"Hold it!" Henry snapped.

Martha sat and pulled the man's head into her lap. She stared defiantly at them. "You're not going to kill him!"

She looked down at him as his eyes opened. He looked up into her eyes

and, before she had a chance to erect the wall she felt his thoughts in her mind. Joy at her presence, thankfulness, humility. All her doubt and fear was gone.

She said, "This isn't one of them. This is Quinn French. I'm sure of it."

He sat up, got unsteadily to his feet. "One of them looked just like me. I don't understand." He knuckled his forehead.

"They were having some sort of a war among themselves. I escaped in the excitement. I guess I got through just in time. The whole place was exploding. They were smashing their own world."

"They're tricky," Jake said to Henry. "Don't trust him."

"Hey," Amro said, "I'm not one of them. I'm Quinn French. Why don't you check instead of waving those guns? Take my prints. They'll check with the ones the Army took of me. Go get some people who have known me all my life. Have them ask me questions. I don't know what the hell has been going on here. All I know is that it's over. Where are Fran and Jerry?"

"They're dead," Henry said.

"Look. I'm burned. The blisters are coming up. Why don't you stop all this talking and take me to a doctor?"

Martha's hand closed warningly on his. Immediately she felt the thought of reassurance in her mind.

"Right," Henry said, "but you're under guard until we're satisfied."

"That suits me," Amro said.

SOME ten days later Martha and Amro lay on a strip of sand side by side. Three miles away scientists and a detachment of the regular army waited for the reappearance of the black oblong. The whole affair had been carefully kept from public knowledge, due to the risk of panic. "Marriage," said Amro, "is an interesting custom. A bit primitive, of course, but I find that I approve."

"Males," said Martha, "no matter what world they come from, are insufferable."

He propped himself up on his elbows. His glance was very direct. "Why did you do it?" he asked. "How did you make yourself take such a risk? You had to assume that I had grown to believe in the things you belive in—and you also had to assume that I wouldn't suddenly stop looking like Quinn and start looking like a monster."

"I reserve the right to be illogical."

"Be illogical out loud. It isn't good taste to invade your mental privacy."

"Go ahead and invade. I'm not modest."

She bared her mind and he reached in, tasted the strength of her belief in him, the love that was there, the perfect trust. It made him feel proud.

"We must plan," he said. "My people have lost the way to this world. They won't find it for a long time. Strada is dead. But they will find the way again from another planet, when it is habitable again, from Strada. By that time we must be ready."

"We? I like to hear that."

"You have a lot to teach me, Martha. I'm such a miserable amateur at this way of life."

"I think you're doing nicely."

He frowned. "I suppose the best thing to do would be to set up a laboratory. Some of my technical training, even though on Strada it was considered elementary, will lead to things that are new here."

"Darling," she said. "So much energy! Don't think about it yet."

He stared at her and grinned. "So?"

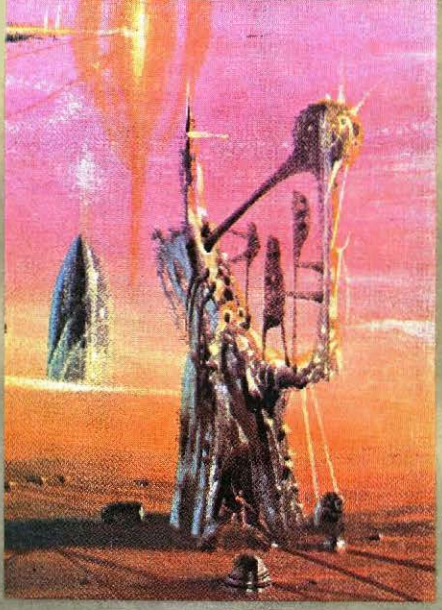
Her blush was violent. "This mind reading," she said, "takes a bit of getting used to."

THE END

★ ★ ★ ★ ★


Virgil
Finlay

out of this world



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THE HUNTERS, by Walt Sheldon