

Gordy is perhaps best known for the group of stories and novels involving Dorsai – the world which produces as its only export the finest mercenary soldiers in known space. (The Hugo-winning "Soldier, Ask Not" is part of this cycle, which is itself only a part of a much larger scheme Gordy calls the Childe Cycle. Ultimately this should involve historical novels, mainstream novels, and possibly a series of concertos for the kazoo – if I recall correctly.) The Dorsai are among the most memorable characters in sf, dark and somber and inflexibly honorable to a man; not (as Gordy has said) men of the military, but men of war. The following story is the only representation of the Dorsai Saga in this collection – and a strikingly atypical one (well, the typical ones are already heavily anthologized). It is also one of my personal favorites.

History says that very often it is the people who do the most for their race that suffer most greatly: Prometheus, Moses, and a Nazarene carpenter come to mind. But the Law of Karma insists that the books always balance in the end – that inherent in every destruction is an . . .

ACT OF CREATION

Now that I have had time to think it over, the quite commonsense explanation occurs to me that old Jonas Wellman must have added an extra, peculiar circuit to cause the one unusual response. He was quite capable of it, of course – technically, that is. And I don't know but what he was equally capable of it psychologically. Nevertheless, at the time, the whole thing shook me up badly.

I had gone up to see him on a traditionally unpleasant duty. His son, Alvin, had been in my outfit at the time of Flander's Charge, off the Vegan Warhold. The boy was liaison officer from the Earth Draft, and he went with the aft gun platform, the Communications Dorsai Regulars, when we got pinched between a light cruiser and one of those rearmed freighters the Vegans filled their assault line with.

The cruiser stood off at a little under a thousand kilometers and boxed us with her light guns. While we were occupied, the freighter came up out of the sun and hit us with a CO beam, before we caught her in our laterals and blew her to bits. It was their CO beam that did it for Alvin and the rest.

At any rate, Alvin had been on loan to us, so to speak, and, as commanding officer, I owed a duty-call to his surviving relatives. At that time, I hadn't connected his last name – Wellman – with Jonas Wellman. Even if I had, I would have had to think a long minute before remembering just who Jonas Wellman was.

Most people using robots nowadays never heard of him. Of course, I had, because we Dorsai mercenaries were the first to use them in combat. When I did make the connection, I remember it struck me as rather odd, because I had never heard Alvin mention his father.

I had duty time-off after that – and, since we were in First Quadrant area, I shuttled to Arcturus and took the short hop to Sol. I had never been on the home world before and I was rather interested to see

what Earth looked like. As usual, with such things, it was somewhat of a disappointment. It's a small world, anyway, and, since it lost its standing as a commercial power, a lot of the old city areas have been grubbed up and turned into residential districts.

In fact, the planet is hardly more than one vast suburb, nowadays. I was told that there's a movement under way to restore some of the old districts as historical shrines, but they'd need Outsystem funds for that, and I can't, myself, see many of the large powers sparing an appropriation at the present time.

Still, there's something about the planet. You can't forget that this was where we all started. I landed in the South Pacific, and took a commuter's rocket to the Mojave. From there, I put in a call to Jonas Wellman, who lived someplace north and west of the mountain, range there – I forget the name of it. He was pleased to hear from me, and invited me up immediately.

I located one of these little automatic taxi-ships, and we puttered north by northwest for about half an hour and finally set down in a small parking area in the Oregon woods. There was nothing there but the glassy rectangle of the area itself, plus an automatic call station for the taxis. A few people were waiting around for their ships to arrive, and, as I sat down, what looked like an A-5 robot came across the field to meet me.

When he got close, I saw he wasn't an A-5, but something similar – possibly something a bit special that Jonas had designed for himself.

"Commandant Jiel?" he asked.

"That's right," I said.

I followed him across the parking area, toward a private hopper. The few people we passed on the way turned their backs as we passed, with a deliberateness and uniformity that was too pointed to be accidental.

For a moment, it occurred to me that I might be the cause of their reaction – certain creeds and certain peoples, who have experienced wars, have no use for the mercenary soldier.

But this was the home world nobody would think of attacking, even if they had a reason for doing so, which, of course, Earth will never be able to give them, as long as the large powers exist.

Belatedly, it occurred to me that the robot with me might be the cause. I turned to look at him. An A-5 – particularly an A-5 – is built to resemble the human form. This was, as I have said, a refined model. I mulled the matter over, trying to phrase the question, so I could get information out of the mechanical.

"Are there Anti-R's in the community here?" I asked finally.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Well, that explained it. The AR's are, in general, folk with an unpleasant emotional reaction to robots. They are psychopathic in my opinion and in that of any man who has used robots commercially or for military purposes. They find robots resembling the human form – particularly the A-5 model and the rest of the A-series – *obscene, disgusting*, and so forth. Some worlds which have experienced wars are almost completely AR.

I didn't, however, expect to find it on Earth, especially so close to the home of Jonas Wellman. Still, a

prophet in his own country, or however the old saying goes.

We took a ground car, which the robot drove, and, eventually, reached a curious anachronism of a house, set off in the woods by itself. It was a long, rambling structure, made in frame of native stone and wood, the only civilized thing about it being vibratory weather-screens between the pillars of the frame, to keep out the rain and wind.

It had a strange aura about it, as if it were a dwelling place, old not so much in years as in memories, as if something about it went back to the very dawn of the race. The rain and the falling night, as we approached it, heightened this illusion so that the tall pines, clustered closely about house and lawn, seemed almost primeval, seemed to enclose us in an ancestral past.

Yet, the house itself was cheerful. Its lighting was inlaid in the archaic framing, and it glowed internally, with a subdued, casual illumination that did not dim the flames in a wide, central fireplace. Real flames from actual burning wood – not an illusion! It touched me, somehow. Few people, unless they have seen the real article, appreciate the difference between the actual flames of a real fire, and those of an illusion.

I, who have experienced the reality, on strange planets, of a need for warmth and light, know the difference very well. It is a subjective reaction, not easily put into words. Perhaps, if you will forgive my straining to be fanciful, who am not a fanciful man, it's this – there are stories in the real flames. I know it can mean nothing to those of you who have never seen it but – try it for yourself, sometime.

Illustration by RICK BRYANT

Jonas Wellman, himself, came forward to meet me, when we stepped through the front screen lens. He was a short, slim man, a little bent about the shoulders, who had let his hair go completely white. He had a gnome's face, all wrinkled, sad and merry in the same instant. He came forward and held out his hand.

"Commandant Jiel," he said.

His voice was as warm as the hissing flames of his fireplace. I took his hand without hesitation, for I am no hater of old traditions.

"Good of you to come," he said. "Sorry about the rain. The district requires it for our trees, and we like our trees around here."

He turned and led the way to a little conversation-area. The robot glided on silent feet behind us, towering over both of us. Though I have the hereditary Dorsai height, the A-5 run to a two-and-a-quarter-meter length, which is possibly one of the reasons the AR dislike them so.

"Sit down, Commandant, sit down, please," Jonas said. "Adam, would you bring us some drinks, please? What would you like, Commandant?"

"Plain ethyl and water, thanks," I said. "It's what we get used to on duty."

He smiled at me in the light of the fire, which was dancing to our right and throwing ruddy lights on his time-marked face.

"Whatever is your pleasure," he said.

The robot brought the glasses. Jonas was drinking something also colorless. I remember I meant to ask him what it was, but never got around to doing so. Instead, I asked him about the robot.

"Adam?" I said. Jonas chuckled.

"He was to be the first of a new series," he answered.

"I didn't mean that," I said. "I meant your naming him at all. Very few people do, nowadays."

"The vogue has passed," he said. "But I've had him for a long time, and I live alone here." The last words reminded us both of my errand, and he stopped rather abruptly. He hurried back into conversation, to bridge the gap. "I suppose you know about my connection with robotics and robots?"

"We used them on Kemelman for land scouts, first, eighty years or so back."

"That's right," he said, his gnome's face saddening a little. "I'd forgotten."

"They were very successful."

"I suppose they were – militarily." He looked squarely at me, suddenly. "No offense to you Dorsai,

Commandant, but I was not in favor of military use of my robots. Only – the decision was taken out of my hands. I lost control of the manufacturing and licensing rights early."

"No offense," I said, but I looked at him curiously. "I didn't know that."

"Oh, yes," he said. "It was a little too big for one man, anyway. First the Earth Council grabbed it, then the Solar Commission. Then it went out in all directions, with every system grabbing a chunk and setting up their own manufactories and regulators."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"Don't be." He shook his head, sticking out his lower lip like someone deprecating something already so small as to be beneath notice. "It was probably inevitable. Then, I think my robots have done more harm than good in the long run, no matter what's been accomplished with them." He shook his head again, smiling. "Not that I was always so resigned to the situation."

"No?"

"No – I had my dreams, when I was younger. To build a better universe, to better people – I was an idealist."

"An idealist?" I repeated. "I don't know the word."

"It's an old one," he answered. "Almost lost its meaning, now. It means – well, that you have a very high opinion of the human race, or people. That you expect the best of them, and want the best for them."

I laughed. "It sounds like being in love with everyone at once."

He nodded, smiling.

"Something like that, Commandant – perhaps not so violent. Tone it down a little and call it being fond of people. I'm a fond sort of person, I suppose. I've been fond of a great many things. Of people, of my robots, of my first wife, of . . ." His voice trailed off and he looked into the firelight. He sighed. "Perhaps," he added, "you'd better tell me about my son, now, Commandant."

I told him briefly. It is always best that way. Make it like a news report, impersonal, then sit back for the questions. There are always the questions.

Jonas Wellman was no different. He sat a little longer than most, after I had finished, staring into the fire, but he came to it at last.

"Commandant," he said, "what did you think of Alvin?"

"Why," I told him, "I didn't know him too well, you know. He was liaison officer from another outfit – almost a visitor aboard our ship. We had different customs, and he kept pretty much to himself." I stopped, but when I saw him still waiting, I had to go on. "He was very quiet, a good sort of officer, not self-conscious with us Dorsai, the way a lot of outsiders are . . ."

I talked on, trying to bring my memory of Alvin Wellman back into focus, but it was not too good. You try to remember the best on these occasions, to forget the worst. The truth was, there was very little to remember. Young Wellman had been like a ghost among us. The only clear memory I could bring to mind was of his sitting back in his corner of the table at mess, his pale young features withdrawn from the place and the technical conversation that went on among the rest of us.

"He was a good man," I wound up finally. "We all liked him."

"Yes." The old man lifted his face from the flames. "He was drafted, you know."

"Oh?" I said – although, of course, I had known it perfectly well. It was why we had called the Solar Contingent the Earth Draft among ourselves. None of them had any real stake in the war, and few had wanted to come. It was Arcturus' doing, as everybody knew. The home system is under Arcturus' thumb, and probably always will be. But you don't tell that to an old man who has lost his only son in a war resulting from such a situation.

"His mother never wanted him to go – but there was no choice." Jonas picked up his drink, sipped it, as an old man will, then put it down again. But his voice was a little stronger when he went on.

"His mother was my second wife, you know. We separated when Alvin was six. That was – that was . . ." His voice took on a fretful note. For the first time a true note of his age rang through it. "When was that, Adam?"

"Eighteen years ago," said the robot suddenly, startling me. I had almost forgotten that he was still with us. His voice, coming unexpectedly out of the fire-cast shadows behind us, made me start.

"Oh, yes – yes. Eighteen years ago," said Jonas, with a sigh of pleasure and relief. He looked over at me with something that was almost like shyness. "Adam is my memory," he said. "Everything that I forget, he remembers – everything! Tell the Commandant what the house was like, then, Adam."

"It was as it is now," said the robot. "The lawn was the same, except that we had a bed of roses along the south edge."

"Ah, yes – those roses," said Jonas, nodding. "Alvin was very fond of those roses. Even as a baby – even when he stuck himself with the thorns."

"Did they have thorns?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes," he answered. "Yes, indeed. I'm very old-fashioned in some ways, Commandant, as you can tell by this house. Something in me has always yearned toward the past. That's why I like it here, with the trees all around me and the mountains standing over and behind them, unchanging, year after year."

"And you were the man who came up with the first practical humanoid robots," I said.

"Why should that surprise you?" He looked at me almost wonderingly. "I didn't intend them to lead us farther away from old virtues, but back to them again."

I shook my head. "I don't see how," I said.

"Why, I wanted to set people free," he said. "I wanted to unite their hands, and their minds. The average

man is essentially good, Commandant. A hundred and forty years of life have never changed my mind about that. He wants to be fond of his fellowman and will, given half a chance."

I shook my head again, but without saying anything. I did not want to argue with him.

"Love is life," he said, "and life is love. All the accidents in the world can't prove that false. Did the accident that took my first wife's life prove that I didn't love her when she was alive? Did the accidental combination of political powers that took my robots from me negate the love for people that caused me to create those robots in the first place?"

"Did the accident that my second wife never really loved me deny the life that was given to Alvin, or my love for him, or his for me – before she took him away? I tell you, he loved me as a baby – didn't he, Adam?"

"He loved you, Jason."

"And I was very fond of him. I was already an old man then. I didn't remarry for many, many years, after my first – my Elaine – died. I thought I would never marry again. But then she came along – and she gave me Alvin. But then she took him away again, for no good reason, except that she knew I was fond of him, and wanted him. She was very bitter against me for not having what she believed I had when she married me." He paused.

"Money," said the robot quietly.

"Yes, money. She thought I still controlled some part of the robot franchise, here in the system, that no one knew about. She was too cautious, too clever, to check fully before she married me. After we were married, it was too late.

"She tried to make a go of it, though, which is much more than another woman might have done in her place. She gave me Alvin. But she had never really liked me, and her dislike grew worse and worse, until she couldn't stand it. So she left me, and took him."

He stopped. The fire flickered on the pillars of the house.

"That's too bad," I said awkwardly. "It – is she still alive?"

"No." He said it abruptly. "She died shortly after Alvin was drafted. I went to see her, but she wouldn't see me. And so, she died. It was then I learned that Alvin was gone. She hadn't told me about the draft."

"I see," I said.

"I was fond of her, too – still," he went on. "But it hurt me that I had not been able to see my son, before he went off to die, so many millions and millions of miles away. If she had left him with me as a boy, I would have taught him to love people, to love everything as I myself have. Perhaps he would have been a success, where I have been a failure." He flung up his head and turned suddenly to the robot.

"Adam, I've been a failure!" he cried.

"No," said the robot.

The old man heaved a heavy sigh. Slowly, the tension leaked out of him, and he slumped back in his

chair. His eyes were abstracted, and on the fire.

"No," I said. "In my opinion, you're no failure, Mr. Wellman. You have to judge success or failure by concrete things. You set out to give robots to people, and you did. That's the one big accomplishment of your life."

"No." He shook his head, his eyes still locked in the heart of the fire. "Love is life. Love should create life to some good, purposeful end. I poured out my love, and all I created came to a dead end. Not the theory, but I fell down. I have Adam tell me that I didn't but this is the sort of soothing syrup an old man feeds himself. Well . . ."

He roused himself. He looked at me and I was surprised at the change in Wellman's face. The sad and merry lines were all fallen into the still mask of great age. It was a face which sees at once the empty future and the lid of the coffin closing soon upon it.

"I get tired quickly nowadays," he said. "If you'll forgive me, Commandant, I'll have Adam take you back to the taxi-area. Thank you for coming this long distance to tell me about Alvin."

He held out his hand. I took it briefly, and stood up. "It's nothing," I said. "We mercenaries spend our lives in moving from one place to another. I was close as star-distances go. Good-by, Mr. Wellman."

He looked up at me from the depths of his chair. "One thing, Commandant," he said. "Just one more thing – were people fond – did the men on your ship really *like* Alvin?"

"Why . . ." I said, fumbling, for the truth was that none of us had known the young man well enough to like or dislike him – and the question had caught me off balance. "Why – they liked him well enough."

The old man sagged. "Yes," he said. His downcast eyes, as if drawn by some force greater than the life within him, wandered back to the fire. "Well, thank you again, Commandant."

"It was nothing. Good-by," I said.

I offered my hand again, but he did not see it. He was seated staring into the flames, seeing something could not imagine. I left him that way.

Outside, the robot opened the door of the ground car for me and slid behind the controls himself. The rain had stopped falling, but the night was heavy and dark. We moved silently down the road, man and mechanical, behind a little yellow pool of light dancing before us from the headlights.

For some time, I sat without saying anything, thinking to myself of odd things the old man's words had somehow conjured up within me – memories of the Dorsai Worlds, of Hevflum, my planet, of the cobalt seas beside our home in Tunisport, of the women of our family – of my grandfather, probably dead by now. What I thought about them, I don't know. I only know that I *did* think of them, one after the other, like a man counting over his possessions.

I roused myself at last, to become conscious of the robot beside me. We were almost at the parking-area, and I could make out my waiting taxi, parked off to one side in the shadows.

"Over there," I directed the robot.

"Yes, sir," he said.

He turned the ground car a trifle in that direction, and we rolled up beside the taxi. He got out, went around to open the door on my side of the car, and let me out. I stepped from floor cushion to the glassy surface of the area and looked at the tall, black metal body of the robot, a full head above me in height.

"Adam . . ." I said.

"Sir?"

But I found I had no words for what seemed to be inside me.

"Nothing," I said.

I stepped up to the entrance of the taxi, closed the door behind me, and moved forward, into the pilot's seat. Out through the window beside me, I could see Adam standing silently, his head now at last a little below mine. I started the engine, then, on sudden impulse, throttled back to idling-power and set the window down. I leaned out of it.

"Adam, come here," I ordered.

The robot took two steps forward, so that he was standing just below the window.

"When you get back to Mr. Wellman," I said, "give him the following message from me. Say that – that. . ."

But it was no use. There was still nothing for me to say. I wanted, with a strange desperation, to send some word to Jonas Wellman, to prove to him that he was not alone in the world, that his love had not failed in its task of creation as we both knew it had. But what could I say in the face of the facts?

"Never mind. *Cancel!*" I said angrily, and turned away, reaching for the throttle. But, just as my hand touched it, the robot's voice drew me back to the window.

"Commandant," it said.

I turned and looked out. The robot had taken a step nearer, and, as I looked, his head swiveled back on its smooth bearings, his face raised to mine. I remember the twin dull gleam of his red eye-lens scanners coming up to me in the shadowy dimness, like two embers in a fire uncovered by a breath and glowing into sudden life.

"Rest easy, Commandant," he said. "I love him."

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Gordy is so good at creating believably alien characters that once at a convention I tugged on his face to see if it would come off. (It didn't, but I'm not entirely sure that proves anything.) Two of his most fascinatingly unique aliens decorate the following story. If you squint at the plot, you'll notice that it's one of the hoariest cliches in the business – turned around one hundred eighty degrees. The art of diplomacy is a subtle and difficult one . . . especially out there in the field.

BROTHER CHARLIE

I

The matter of her standby burners trembled through the APC9 like the grumbling of an imminent and not entirely unominous storm. In the cramped, lightly grease-smelling cockpit, Chuck Wagnall sat running through the customary preflight check on his instruments and controls. There were a great many to check out – almost too many for the small cockpit space to hold; but then old number 9, like all of her breed, was equipped to operate almost anywhere but underwater. She could even have operated there as well, but she would have needed a little time to prepare herself, before immersion.

On his left-hand field screen the Tomah envoy escort was to be seen in the process of moving the Tomah envoy aboard. The Lugh, Binichi, was already in his bin. Chuck wasted neither time nor attention on these – but when his ship range screen lit up directly before him, he glanced at it immediately.

"Hold Seventy-nine," he said automatically to himself, and pressed the acknowledge button.

The light cleared to reveal the face of Roy Marlie, Advance Unit Supervisor. Roy's brown hair was neatly combed in place, his uniform closure pressed tight, and his blue eyes casual and relaxed – and at these top danger signals, Chuck felt his own spine stiffen.

"Yo, how's it going, Chuck?" Roy asked.

"Lift in about five minutes."

"Any trouble picking up Binichi?"

"A snap," said Chuck. "He was waiting for me right on the surface of the bay. For two cents' worth of protocol he could have boarded her here with the Tomah."

Chuck studied the face of his superior in the screen. He wanted very badly to ask Roy what was up; but when and if the supervisor wanted to get to the point of his call, he would do so on his own initiative.

"Let's see your flight plan," said Roy.

Chuck played the fingers of his left hand over the keys of a charter to his right. There appeared superimposed on the face of the screen between himself and Roy an outline of the two continents of this planet that the Tomah called Rant and the Lugh called Vanyinni. A red line that was his projected course crept across a great circle arc from the dot of his present position, over the ocean gap to the dot well inside the coastline of the southern continent. The dot was the human Base camp position.

"You could take a coastal route," said Roy, studying it.

"This one doesn't put us more than eight hundred nautical miles from land at the midpoint between the continents."

"Well, it's your neck," said Roy, with a light-heartedness as ominous as the noise of the standby burners. "Oh, by the way, guess who we've got here? Just landed. Your uncle, Member Wagnall."

Aha! said Chuck. But he said it to himself. "Tommy?" he said aloud. "Is he handy, there?"

"Right here," answered Roy, and backed out of the screen to allow a heavy, graying-haired man with a kind, broad face to take his place.

"Chuck, boy, how are you?" said the man.

"Never better, Tommy," said Chuck. "How's politicking?"

"The appropriations committee's got me out on a one-man junket to check up on you lads," said Earth District Member 439 Thomas L. Wagnall. "I promised your mother I'd say hello to you if I got to this Base. What's all this about having this project named after you?"

"Oh, not after me," said Chuck. "Its full name isn't Project Charlie, it's Project Big Brother Charlie. With us humans as Big Brother."

"I don't seem to know the reference."

"Didn't you ever hear that story?" said Chuck. "About three brothers – the youngest were twins and fought all the time. The only thing that stopped them was their big brother Charlie coming on the scene."

"I see," said Tommy. "With the Tomah and the Lugh as the two twins. Very apt. Let's just hope Big Brother can be as successful in this instance."

"Amen," said Chuck. "They're a couple of touchy peoples."

"Well," said Tommy. "I was going to run out where you are now and surprise you, but I understand you've got the only atmosphere pot of the outfit."

"You see?" said Chuck. "That proves we need more funds and equipment. Talk it up for us when you get back, Tommy. Those little airfoils you saw on the field when you came in have no range at all."

"Well, we'll see," said Tommy. "When do you expect to get here?"

"I'll be taking off in a few minutes. Say four hours."

"Good. I'll buy you a drink of diplomatic scotch when you get in."

Chuck grinned.

"Bless the governmental special supply. And you. See you, Tommy."

"I'll be waiting," said the Member. "You want to talk to your chief, again?"

He looked away outside the screen range. "He says nothing more. So long, Chuck."

"So long."

They cut connections. Chuck drew a deep breath. "Hold Seventy-nine," he murmured to his memory, and went back to check that item on his list.

He had barely completed his full check when a roll of drums from outside the ship, penetrating even over the sound of the burners, announced that the Tomah envoy was entering the ship. Chuck got up and went back through the door that separated the cockpit from the passenger and freight sections.

The envoy had just entered through the lock and was standing with his great claw almost in salute. He most nearly resembled, like all the Tomah, a very large ant with the front pair of legs developed into arms with six fingers each and double-opposed thumbs. In addition, however, a large, lobster-like claw was hinged just behind and above the waist. When standing erect, as now, he measured about four feet from mandibles to the point where his rear pair of legs rested on the ground, although the great claw, fully extended, could have lifted something off a shelf a good foot or more above Chuck's head – and Chuck was over six feet in height. Completely unadorned as he was, this Tomah weighed possibly ninety to a hundred and ten Earth-pounds.

Chuck supplied him with a small throat-mike translator.

"Bright seasons," said the Tomah, as soon as this was adjusted. The translator supplied him with a measured, if uninflected voice.

"Bright seasons," responded Chuck. "And welcome aboard, as we humans say. Now, if you'll just come over here –"

He went about the process of assisting the envoy into the bin across the aisle from the Lugh, Binichi. The Tomah had completely ignored the other; and all through the process of strapping in the envoy, Binichi neither stirred, nor spoke.

"There you are," said Chuck, when he was finished, looking down at the reclining form of the envoy. "Comfortable?"

"Pardon me," said the envoy. "Your throat-talker did not express itself."

"I said, comfortable?"

"You will excuse me," said the envoy. "You appear to be saying something I don't understand."

"Are you suffering any pain, no matter how slight, from the harness and bin I put you in?"

"Thank you," said the envoy. "My health is perfect." He saluted Chuck from the reclining position. Chuck saluted back and turned to his other passenger. The similarity here was the throat-translator, that little miracle of engineering, which the Lugh, in common with the envoy and Chuck, wore as close as possible to his larynx.

"How about you?" said Chuck. "Still comfortable?"

"Like sleeping on a ground-swell," said Binichi. He grinned up at Chuck. Or perhaps he did not grin – like that of the dolphin he so much resembled, the mouth of the Lugh had a built-in upward twist at the corners. He lay. Extended at length in the bin he measured a few inches over five feet and weighed most undoubtedly over two hundred pounds. His wide-spreading tail was folded up like a fan into something resembling a club and his four short limbs were tucked in close to the short snowy fur of his belly. "I would like to see what the ocean looks like from high up."

"I can manage that for you," said Chuck. He went up front, unplugged one of the extra screens and brought it back. "When you look into this," he said, plugging it in above the bin, "it'll be like looking down through a hole in the ship's bottom."

"I will feel upside down," said Binichi. "That should be something new, too." He bubbled in his throat, an odd sound that the throat-box made no attempt to translate. Human sociologists had tried to equate this Lugh noise with laughter, but without much success. The difficulty lay in understanding what might be funny and what might not, to a different race. "You've got my opposite number tied down over there?"

"He's in harness," said Chuck.

"Good." Binichi bubbled again. "No point in putting temptation in my way."

He closed his eyes. Chuck went back to the cockpit, closed the door behind him, and sat down at the controls. The field had been cleared. He fired up and took off.

When the pot was safely airborne, he set the course on autopilot and leaned back to light a cigarette. For the first time he felt the tension in his neck and shoulder blades and stretched, to break its grip. Now was no time to be tightening up. But what had Binichi meant by this last remark? He certainly wouldn't be fool enough to attack the Tomah on dry footing?

Chuck shook off the ridiculous notion. Not that it was entirely ridiculous – the Lugh were individualists from the first moment of birth, and liable to do anything. But in this case both sides had given the humans their words (Binichi his personal word and the nameless Tomah their collective word) that there would be no trouble between the representatives of the two races. The envoy, Chuck was sure, would not violate the word of his people, if only for the reason that he would weigh his own life as nothing in comparison to the breaking of a promise. Binichi, on the other hand . . .

The Lugh were impeccably honest. The strange and difficult thing was, however, that they were much harder to understand than the Tomah, in spite of the fact that being warm-blooded and practically mammalian they appeared much more like the human race than the chitinous land-dwellers. Subtle shades and differences of meaning crept into every contact with the Lugh. They were a proud, strong, free, and oddly artistic people; in contradistinction to the intricately organized, highly logical Tomah, who took their

pleasure in spectacle and group action.

But there was no sharp dividing line that placed some talents all on the Tomah side, and others all on the Lugh. Each people had musical instruments, each performed group dances, each had a culture and a science and a history. And, in spite of the fantastic surface sociological differences, each made the family unit a basic one, each was monogamous, each entertained the concept of a single deity, and each had very sensitive personal feelings.

The only trouble was, they had no use for each other – and a rapidly expanding human culture needed them both.

It so happened that this particular world was the only humanly habitable planet out of six circling a sun which was an ideal jumping-off spot for further spatial expansion. To use this world as a space depot of the size required, however, necessitated a local civilization of a certain type and level to support it. From a practical point of view this could be supplied only by a native culture both agreeable and sufficiently advanced to do so.

Both the Tomah and the Lugh were agreeable, as far as the humans were concerned. They were not advanced enough, and could not be, as long as they remained at odds.

It was not possible to advance one small segment of a civilization. It had to be upgraded as a whole. That meant cooperation, which was not now in effect. The Tomah had a science, but no trade. They were isolated on a few of the large land-masses by the seas that covered nine-tenths of their globe. Ironically, on a world which had great amounts of settleable land and vast untapped natural resources, they were cramped for living room and starved for raw materials. All this because to venture out on the Lugh-owned seas was sheer suicide. Their civilization was still in the candlelit, domestic-beast-powered stage, although they were further advanced in theory.

The Lugh, on the other hand, with the overwhelming resources of the oceans at their disposal, had by their watery environment been prohibited from developing a chemistry. The sea-girt islands and the uninhabited land masses were open to them; but, being already on the favorable end of the current status quo, they had had no great need or urge to develop further. What science they had come up with had been mainly for the purpose of keeping the Tomah in their place.

The human sociologists had given their opinion that the conflicts between the two races were no longer based on valid needs. They were, in fact, hangovers from competition in more primitive times when both peoples sought to control the seashores and marginal lands. To the Tomah in those days (and still), access to the seas had meant a chance to tap a badly needed source of food; and to the Lugh (no longer), access to the shore had meant possession of necessary breeding grounds. In the past the Tomah had attempted to clear the Lugh from their path by exterminating their helpless land-based young. And the Lugh had tried to starve the Tomah out, by way of retaliation.

The problem was to bury these ancient hatreds and prove cooperation was both practical and profitable. The latest step in this direction was to invite representatives of both races to a conference at the human Base on the uninhabited southern continent of this particular hemisphere. The humans would act as mediator, since both sides were friendly toward them. Which was what caused Chuck to be at the controls now, with his two markedly dissimilar passengers in the bins behind him.

Unfortunately, the sudden appearance of Member Thomas Wagnall meant they were getting impatient back home. In fact, he could not have come at a worse time. Human prestige with the two races was all humanity had to work with; and it was a delicate thing. And now had arisen this suddenly new question in

Chuck's mind as to whether Binichi had regarded his promise to start no trouble with the Tomah as an ironclad guaranty, or a mere casual agreement contingent upon a number of unknown factors.

The question acquired its full importance a couple of hours later, and forty thousand feet above nothing but ocean, when the main burners abruptly cut out.

Illustration by RICK BRYANT

II

Chuck wiped blood from his nose and shook his head to clear it. Underneath him, the life raft was rocking in soothing fashion upon the wide swell of the empty ocean; but, in spite of the fact that he knew better, he was having trouble accepting the reality of his present position.

Everything had happened a little too fast. His training for emergency situations of this sort had been semi-hypnotic. He remembered now a blur of action in which he had jabbed the distress button to send out an automatic signal on his position and predicament. Just at that moment the standby burners had cut in automatically – which was where he had acquired the bloody nose, when the unexpected thrust slammed him against the controls. Then he had cut some forty-two various switches, got back to the main compartment, unharnessed his passengers, herded them into the escape hatch, blown them all clear, hit the water, inflated the life raft, and got them aboard it just as the escape hatch itself sank gracefully out of sight. The pot, of course, had gone down like so much pig iron when it hit.

And here they were.

Chuck wiped his nose again and looked at the far end of the rectangular life raft. Binichi, the closer of the two, was half-lolling, half-sitting on the curved muscle of his tail. His curved mouth was half-open as if he might be laughing at them. And indeed, thought Chuck, he very well might. Chuck and the envoy, adrift on this watery waste, in this small raft, were castaways in a situation that threatened their very lives. Binichi the Lugh was merely and comfortably back at home.

"Binichi," said Chuck. "Do you know where we are?"

The curved jaw gaped slightly wider. The Lugh head turned this way and that on the almost nonexistent neck; then, twisting, he leaned over the edge of the raft and plunged his whole head briefly under water like a duck searching for food. He pulled his head out again, now slick with moisture.

"Yes," said Binichi.

"How far are we from the coast of the south continent?"

"A day's swim," said Binichi. "And most of a night." He gave his information as a simple statement of fact. But Chuck knew the Lugh was reckoning in his own terms of speed and distance, which were roughly twelve nautical miles an hour as a steady pace. Undoubtedly it could be done in better time if a Lugh had wished to push himself. The human Base had clocked some of this race at up to eighty miles an hour through the water for short bursts of speed.

Chuck calculated. With the small outboard thrust unit provided for the raft, they would be able to make about four miles an hour if no currents went against them. Increase Binichi's estimate then by a factor of three – three days and nights with a slight possibility of its being less and a very great probability of its taking more. Thought of the thrust unit reminded him. He went to work unfolding it from its waterproof seal and attaching it in running position. Binichi watched him with interest, his head cocked a little on one side like an inquisitive bird's; but as soon as the unit began to propel the raft through the waves at its maximum cruising speed of four miles an hour, his attention disappeared.

With the raft running smoothly, Chuck had another question.

"Which way?"

Binichi indicated with a short thick-muscled forearm, and Chuck swung the raft in nearly a full turn. A slight shiver ran down his spine as he did so. He had been heading away from land out into nearly three thousand miles of open ocean.

"Now," said Chuck; locking the tiller, and looking at both of them. "It'll take us three days and nights to

make the coast. And another three or four days to make it overland from there to the Base. The accident happened so quickly I didn't have time to bring along anything with which I could talk to my friends there." He paused, then added: "I apologize for causing you this inconvenience."

"There is no inconvenience," said Binichi, and bubbled in his throat. The envoy neither moved nor answered.

"This raft," said Chuck, "has food aboard it for me, but nothing, I think, that either one of you could use. There's water, of course. Otherwise, I imagine Binichi can make out with the sea all around him, the way it is; and I'm afraid there's not much to be done for you, Envoy, until we reach land. Then you'll be in Binichi's position of being able to forage for yourself."

The envoy still did not answer. There was no way of knowing what he was thinking. Sitting facing the two of them, Chuck tried to imagine what it must be like for the Tomah, forced into a position inches away from his most deadly traditional enemy. And with the private preserves of that enemy, the deep-golfed sea, source of all his culture's legends and terrors, surrounding him. True; the envoy was the pick of his people, a learned and intelligent being – but possibly there could be such a situation here that would try his self-control too far.

Chuck had no illusions about his ability to cope, barehanded, with either one of his fellow passengers – let alone come between them if they decided on combat. At the same time he knew that if it came to that, he would have to try. There could be no other choice; for the sake of humanity's future here on this world, all three races would hold him responsible.

The raft plodded on toward the horizon. Neither the Tomah nor Binichi had moved. They seemed to be waiting.

They traveled all through the afternoon, and the night that followed. When the sun came up the following morning they seemed not to have moved at all. The sea was all around them as before and unchanging. Binichi now lay half-curved upon the yielding bottom of the raft, his eyes all but closed. The envoy appeared not to have moved an inch. He stood tensely in his corner, claw at half-cock, like a statue carved from his native rock.

With the rising sun; the wind began to freshen. The gray rolling furrows of the sea's eternal surface deepened and widened. The raft tilted, sliding up one heavy slope and down another.

"Binichi!" said Chuck.

The Lugh opened his near eye lazily.

"Is it going to storm?"

"There will be wind," said Binichi.

"Much wind?" asked Chuck – and then realized that his question was too general. "How high will the waves be?"

"About my height," said Binichi. "It will be calmer in the afternoon."

It began to grow dark rapidly after that. By ten o'clock on Chuck's chronometer it was as murky as twilight. Then the rain came suddenly, and a solid sheet of water blotted out the rest of the raft from his

eyes.

Chuck clung to the thrust unit for something to hang onto. In the obscurity, the motion of the storm was eerie. The raft seemed to plunge forward, mounting a slope that stretched endlessly, until with a sudden twist and dip, it adopted a down-slant to forward – and then it seemed to fly backward in that position with increasing rapidity until its angle was as suddenly reversed again. It was like being on a monstrous seesaw that, even as it went up and down, was sliding back and forth on greased rollers.

At some indeterminate time later, Chuck began to worry about their being washed out of the raft. There were lines in the locker attached midway to the left-hand side of the raft. He crawled forward on hands and knees and found the box. It opened to his cold fingers, and he clawed out the coiled lines.

It struck him then, for the first time, that on this small, circumscribed raft, he should have bumped into Binichi or the envoy in making his way to the box. He lifted his face to the wind and the rain and darkness, but it told him nothing. And then he felt something nudge his elbow.

"He is gone," said the voice of the envoy's translator, in Chuck's ear.

"Gone?" yelled Chuck above the storm. "He went over the side a little while ago."

Chuck clung to the box as the raft suddenly reversed its angle.

"How do you know?"

"I saw him," said the envoy.

"You –" Chuck yelled, "you can see in this?"

There was a slight pause.

"Of course," said the envoy. "Can't you?"

"No." Chuck unwound the lines. "We better tie ourselves into the raft," he shouted. "Keep from being washed overboard."

The envoy did not answer. Taking silence for assent, Chuck reached for him in the obscurity and passed one of the lines about the chitinous body. He secured the line tightly to the ring-handgrips fastened to the inner side of the raft's edge. Then he tied himself securely with a line around his waist to a handgrip further back by the thrust unit.

They continued to ride the pitching ocean. After some time, the brutal beating of the rain slackened off; and a little light began to filter through. The storm cleared then, as suddenly as it had commenced. Within minutes the raft heaved upon a metal-gray sea under thinning clouds in a sky from which the rain had ceased falling.

Teeth chattering, Chuck crawled forward to his single remaining passenger and untied the rope around him. The envoy was crouched down in his corner, his great claw hugging his back, as if he huddled for warmth. When Chuck untied him, he remained so motionless that Chuck was struck with the sudden throat-tightening fear that he was dead.

"Are you all right?" asked Chuck.

"Thank you," said the envoy; "I am in perfect health."

Chuck turned away to contemplate the otherwise empty raft. He was, he told himself, doing marvelously. Already, one of his charges had taken off . . . and then, before he could complete the thought, the raft rocked suddenly and the Lugh slithered aboard over one high side.

He and Chuck looked at each other. Binichi bubbled comfortably.

"Looks like the storm's over," said Chuck.

"It is blowing to the south of us now," said the Lugh.

"How far are we from land, now?"

"We should come to it," said Binichi, "in the morning."

Chuck blinked a little in surprise. This was better time than he had planned. And then he realized that the wind was blowing at their backs, and had been doing so all through the storm. He looked up at the sky. The sun was past its zenith, and a glance at his watch, which was corrected for local time, showed the hands at ten minutes to three. Chuck turned his attention back to Binichi, revolving the phraseology of his next question in his mind.

"Did you get washed overboard?" he asked, at last.

"Washed overboard?" Binichi bubbled. "I went into the water. It was more pleasant."

"Oh," said Chuck.

They settled down once more to their traveling.

A little over an hour later the raft jarred suddenly and rocked as if, without warning, it had found a rock beneath it, here in the middle of the ocean. For a second Chuck entertained the wild idea that it had. But such a notion was preposterous. There were undersea mountains all through this area, but the closest any came to the surface was a good forty fathoms down. At the same time the envoy's claw suddenly shot up and gaped above him, as he recoiled toward the center of the boat; and, looking overboard, Chuck came into view of the explanation for both occurrences.

A gray back as large around as an oil drum and ten to twelve feet in length was sliding by about a fathom and a half below them. At a little distance off Chuck could make out a couple more. As he watched, they turned slowly and came back toward the raft again.

Chuck recognized these sea-creatures. He had been briefed on them. They were the local counterpart of the Earthly shark – not as bloodthirsty, but they could be dangerous enough. They had wide catfish-like mouths, equipped with cartilaginous ridges rather than teeth. They were scavengers, rather than predators, generally feeding off the surface. As he watched now, the closest rose slowly to the surface in front of him, and suddenly an enormous jaw gaped a full six feet in width and closed over the high rim of the raft. The plastic material squealed to the rubbing of the horny ridges, giving but not puncturing. Temporarily defeated, the jaws opened again and the huge head sank back under the water.

Chuck's hand went instinctively to his belt for the handgun that was, of course, not there.

The raft jolted and twisted and rocked for several moments as the creatures tried to overturn it. The envoy's claw curved and jerked this way and that above him, like a sensitive antenna, at each new sound or jolt. Binichi rested lazy-eyed on the raft's bottom, apparently concerned only with the warmth of the sun upon his drying body.

After several minutes, the attacks on the raft ceased and the creatures drew off through the water. Chuck could catch a glimpse of them some thirty yards or so off, still following. Chuck looked back at Binichi, but the Lugh had his eyes closed as if he dozed. Chuck drew a deep breath and turned to the envoy.

"Would you like some water?" he asked.

The envoy's claw had relaxed slightly upon his back. He turned his head toward Chuck.

"If you have any you do not desire yourself," he said. Chuck got out the water, debated offering some to the Lugh out of sheer form and politeness, then took his cue from the fact that Binichi appeared asleep, and confined his attentions to the envoy and himself. It surprised him now to remember that he had not thought of water up until this moment. He wondered if the Tomah had been suffering for it in silence, too polite or otherwise to ask for some.

This latter thought decided him against eating any of the food that the boat was also provided with. If they would reach land inside of another twelve or fourteen hours, he could last until then. It would hardly be kind, not to say politic, to eat in front of the Tomah when nothing was available for that individual. Even the Lugh, if he had eaten at all, had done so when he was out of the raft during the night and storm, when they could not see him.

Chuck and the envoy drank and settled down again. Sundown came quickly; and Chuck, making himself as comfortable as possible, went to sleep.

He woke with a start. For a second he merely lay still on the soft, yielding bottom of the raft without any clear idea as to what had brought him into consciousness. Then a very severe bump from underneath the raft almost literally threw him up into a sitting position.

The planet's small, close moon was pouring its brilliant light across the dark waters, from a cloudless sky. The night was close to being over, for the moon was low and its rays struck nearly level on the wave tops. The sea had calmed, but in its closer depths were great moving streaks and flashes of phosphorescence. For a moment these gleams only baffled and confused his eyes; and then Chuck saw that they were being made by the same huge scavengers that had bothered the raft earlier – only now there were more than a dozen of them, filling the water about and underneath the raft.

The raft rocked again as one of them struck it once more from below.

Chuck grabbed at the nearest ring-handhold and glanced at his fellow passengers. Binichi lay as if asleep, but in the dark shadow of his eye-sockets little reflected glints of light showed where his eyeballs gleamed in the darkness. Beyond him, the envoy was fully awake and up on all four feet, his claw extended high above him, and swaying with every shock like the balancing pole of a tightrope walker. His

front pair of handed limbs were also extended on either side as if for balance. Chuck opened his mouth to call to the Tomah to take hold on one of the handgrips.

At that moment, however, there rose from out of the sea at his elbow a pair of the enormous ridged jaws. Like the mouth of a trout, closing over a fly, these clamped down, suddenly and without warning, on the small, bright metal box of the thrust unit where it was fastened to the rear end of the raft. And the raft itself was suddenly jerked and swung as the sea-creature tore the thrust unit screeching from its moorings into the sea. The raft was upended by the force of the wrench; and Chuck, holding on for dear life from sliding into the sea, saw the creature that had pulled the unit loose release it disappointedly, as if sensing its inedibility. It glittered down through the dark waters, falling from sight.

The raft slammed back down on the watery surface. And immediately on the heels of this came the sound of a large splash. Jerking his head around, Chuck saw the envoy struggling in the ocean.

His black body glittered among the waves, his thrashing limbs kicking up little dashes and glitters of phosphorescence. Chuck hurled himself to the far end of the raft and stretched out his hand, but the Tomah was already beyond his reach. Chuck turned, and dived back to the box at midraft, pawing through it for the line he had used to tie them in the boat earlier. It came up tangled in his hands. He lunged to the end of the raft nearest the envoy again, trying to unravel the line as he did so.

It came slowly and stubbornly out of its snarl. But when he got it clear at last and threw it, its unweighted end fell little more than halfway of the widening distance between the raft and the Tomah.

Chuck hauled it in, in a frenzy of despair. The raft, sitting high in the water, was being pushed by the night wind farther from the envoy with every second. The envoy himself had in all this time made no sound, only continuing to thrash his limbs in furious effort. His light body seemed in no danger of sinking; but his narrow limbs in uncoordinated effort barely moved him through the water – and now the scavengers were once more beginning to enter the picture.

These, like any fish suddenly disturbed, had scattered at the first splash of the Tomah's body. For a short moment it had seemed that they had been frightened away entirely. But now they were beginning to circle in, moving around the envoy, dodging close, then flirting away again – but always ending up a little closer than before. Chuck twisted about to face Binichi.

"Can't you do something?" he cried.

Binichi regarded him with his race's usual unreadable expression.

"I?" he said.

"You could swim to him and let him hang on to you and tow him back," said Chuck. "Hurry!"

Binichi continued to look at him.

"You don't want the Tomah eaten?" he said at last.

"Of course not!"

"Then why don't you bring him back yourself to this thing?"

"I can't. I can't swim that well!" said Chuck. "You can."

"You can't?" echoed Binichi slowly. "I can?"

"You know that."

"Still," said the Lugh. "I would have thought you had some way – it's nothing to me if the Tomah is eaten."

"You promised."

"Not to harm him," said Binichi. "I have not. The Tomah have killed many children to get at the sea. Now this one has the sea. Let him drink it. The Tomah have been hungry for fish. This one has fish. Let him eat the fish."

Chuck brought his face close to the grinning dolphin head.

"You promised to sit down with us and talk to that Tomah," he said. "If you let him die, you're dodging that promise."

Binichi stared back at him for a short moment. Then he bubbled abruptly and went over the side of the raft in a soaring leap. He entered the water with his short limbs tucked in close to his body and his wide tail fanning out. Chuck had heard about, but never before seen, the swiftness of the Lugh, swimming. Now he saw it. Binichi seemed to give a single wriggle and then torpedo like a streak of phosphorescent lightning just under the surface of the water toward the struggling envoy.

One of the scavengers was just coming up under the Tomah. The streak of watery fire that was Binichi converged upon him and his heavy shape shot struggling from the surface, the sound of a dull impact heavy in the night. Then the phosphorescence of Binichi's path was among the others, striking right and left as a swordfish strikes on his run among a school of smaller feed fish. The scavengers scattered into darkness, all but the one Binichi had first hit, which was flopping upon the surface of the moonlit sea as if partially paralyzed.

Binichi broke surface himself, plowing back toward the Tomah. His head butted the envoy and a second later the envoy was skidding and skittering like a toy across the water's surface to the raft. A final thrust at the raft's edge sent him up and over it. He tumbled on his back on the raft's floor, glittering with wetness; and, righting himself with one swift thrust of his claw, he whirled, claw high, to face Binichi as the Lugh came sailing aboard.

Binichi sprang instantly erect on the curved spring of his tail; and Chuck, with no time for thought, thrust himself between the two of them.

For a second Chuck's heart froze. He found himself with his right cheek bare inches from the heavy double meat-choppers of the Tomah claw, while, almost touching him on the left, the gaping jaws of the Lugh glinted with thick, short scimitar-like teeth, and the fishy breath of the sea-dweller filled his nostrils. In this momentary, murderous tableau they all hung motionless for a long, breathless second. And then the Tomah claw sank backward to the shiny back below it and the Lugh slid backward and down upon his tail. Slowly, the two members of opposing races retreated each to his own end of the raft.

Chuck, himself, sat down. And the burst of relieved breath that expelled itself from his tautened lungs echoed in the black and moonlit world of the seascape night.

III

Some two hours after sunrise, a line of land began to make its appearance upon their further horizon. It mounted slowly, as the onshore wind, and perhaps some current as well, drove them ahead. It was a barren, semiarid and tropical coastline, with a rise of what appeared to be hills – light green with a sparse vegetation – beyond it.

As they drifted closer, the shoreline showed itself in a thin pencil-mark of foam. No outer line of reefs was apparent, but the beaches themselves seemed to be rocky or nonexistent. Chuck turned to the Lugh.

"We need a calm, shallow spot to land in," he said. "Otherwise the raft's liable to upset in the surf, going in."

Binichi looked at him, but did not answer.

"I'm sorry," said Chuck. "I guess I didn't explain myself properly. What I mean is, I'm asking for your help again. If the raft upsets or has a hole torn in it when we're landing, the envoy and I will probably drown. Could you find us a fairly smooth beach somewhere and help us get to it?"

Binichi straightened up a little where he half-sat, half-lay propped against the end of the raft where the thrust unit had been attached.

"I had been told," he said, "that you had oceans upon your own world."

"That's right," said Chuck. "But we had to develop the proper equipment to move about on them. If I had the proper equipment here I wouldn't have to ask you for help. If it hadn't been for our crashing in the ocean none of this would be necessary."

"This 'equipment' of yours seems to have an uncertain nature," said Binichi. He came all the way erect. "I'll help you." He flipped overboard and disappeared.

Left alone in the raft with the envoy, Chuck looked over at him.

"The business of landing will probably turn out to be difficult and dangerous – at least we better assume the worst," he said. "You understand you may have to swim for your life when we go in?"

"I have given my word to accomplish this mission," replied the envoy.

A little while after that, it became evident from the angle at which the raft took the waves that they had changed course. Chuck, looking about for an explanation of this, discovered Binichi at the back of the raft, pushing them.

Within the hour, the Lugh had steered them to a small, rocky inlet. Picked up in the landward surge of

the surf, the raft went, as Chuck had predicted, end over end in a smother of water up on the pebbly beach. Staggering to his feet with the solid land at last under him, Chuck smeared water from his eyes and took inventory of a gashed and bleeding knee. Binding the cut as best he could with a strip torn from his now-ragged pants, he looked about for his fellow travelers.

The raft was flung upside down between himself and them. Just beyond it, the envoy lay with his claw arm flung limply out on the sand. Binichi, a little further on, was sitting up like a seal. As Chuck watched, the envoy stirred, pulled his claw back into normal position, and got shakily up on all four legs.

Chuck went over to the raft and, with some effort, managed to turn it back, right side up. He dug into the storage boxes and got out food and water. He was not sure whether it was the polite, or even the sensible thing to do, but he was shaky from hunger, parched from the salt water, dizzy from the pounding in the surf – and his knee hurt. He sat down and made his first ravenous meal since the pot had crashed in the sea, almost two days before.

As he was at it, the Tomah envoy approached. Chuck offered him some of the water, which the Tomah accepted.

"Sorry I haven't anything you could eat," said Chuck, a full belly having improved his manners.

"It doesn't matter," said the envoy. "There will be flora growing farther inland that will stay my hunger. It's good to be back on the land."

"I'll go along with you on that statement," said Chuck. Looking up from the food and water, he saw the Lugh approaching. Binichi came up, walking on his four short limbs, his tail folded into a club over his back for balance, and sat down with them.

"And now?" he said, addressing Chuck.

"Well," said Chuck, stretching his cramped back, "we'll head inland toward the Base." He reached into his right-hand pants pocket and produced a small compass. "That direction" – he pointed toward the hills without looking – "and some five hundred miles. Only we shouldn't have to cover it all on foot. If we can get within four hundred miles of Base, we'll be within the airfoils' cruising range; and one of them should locate us and pick us up."

"Your people will find us, but they can't find us here?" said Binichi.

"That's right." Chuck looked at the Lugh's short limbs. "Are you up to making about a hundred-mile trip overland?"

"As you've reminded me before," said Binichi, "I made a promise. It will help, though, if I can find water to go into from time to time."

Chuck turned to the envoy.

"Can we find bodies of water as we go?"

"I don't know this country," said the Tomah, speaking to Chuck. "But there should be water; and I'll watch for it."

"We two could go ahead," said Chuck, turning back to the Lugh. "And maybe we could work some

way of getting a vehicle back here to carry you."

"I've never needed to be carried," said Binichi, and turned away abruptly. "Shall we go?"

They went.

Striking back from the stoniness of the beach, they passed through a belt of shallow land covered with shrub and coarse grass. Chuck, watching the envoy, half-expected him to turn and feed on some of this as they passed, but the Tomah went straight ahead. Beyond the vegetated belt, they came on dunes of coarse sand, where the Lugh – although he did not complain, any more than the envoy had when he fell overboard from the raft – had rough going with his short limbs. This stretched for a good five miles; but when they had come at last to firmer ground, the first swellings of the foothills seemed not so far ahead of them.

They were now in an area of small trees with numbers of roots sprouting from the trunk above ground level, and of sticklike plants resembling cacti. The envoy led them, his four narrow limbs propelling him with a curious smoothness over the uncertain ground as if he might at any moment break into a run. However, he regulated his pace to that of the Lugh, who was the slowest in the party, though he showed no signs as yet of discomfort or of tiring.

This even space was broken with dramatic suddenness as they crossed a sort of narrow earth-bridge or ridge between two of the gullies. Without any warning, the envoy wheeled suddenly and sprinted down the almost perpendicular slope on his left, zigzagging up the gully bed as if chasing something and into a large hole in the dry, crumbling earth of the further bank. A sudden thin screaming came from the hole and the envoy tumbled out into the open with a small furry creature roughly in the shape of a weasel and about the size of a large rabbit. The screaming continued for a few seconds. Chuck turned his head away, shaken.

He was aware of Binichi staring at him.

"What's wrong?" asked the Lugh. "You showed no emotion when I hurt the –" His translator failed on a word.

"What?" said Chuck. "I didn't understand. When you hurt what?"

"One of those who would have eaten the Tomah."

"I . . ." Chuck hesitated. He could not say that it was because this small land creature had had a voice to express its pain while the sea-dweller had not. "It's our custom to kill our meat before eating it."

Binichi bubbled.

"This will be too new to the Tomah for ritual," he said.

Reinforcement for this remark came a moment or two later when the envoy came back up the near wall of the gully to rejoin them.

"This is a paradise of plenty, this land," he said. "Only once in my life before was I ever lucky enough to taste meat." He lifted his head to them. "Shall we go on?"

"We should try to get to some water soon," said Chuck, glancing at Binichi.

"I have been searching for it," said the envoy. "Now I smell it not far off. We should reach it before dark." They went on; and gradually the gullies thinned out and they found themselves on darker earth, among more and larger trees. Just as the sunset was reddening the sky above the upthrust outline of the near hills, they entered a small glen where a stream trickled down from a higher slope and spread out into a small pool. Binichi trotted past them without a word, and plunged in.

Chuck woke when the morning sun was just beginning to touch the glen. For a moment he lay still under the mass of small-leaved branches with which he had covered himself the night before, a little bewildered to find himself no longer on the raft. Then memory returned and with it sensation, spreading through the stiff limbs of his body.

For the first time, he realized that his strength was ebbing. He had had first the envoy and then Binichi to worry about, and so he had been able to keep his mind off his own state.

His stomach was hollow with hunger that the last night's meager rations he had packed from the raft had done little to assuage. His muscles were cramped from the unusual exercise and he had the sick, dizzy feeling that comes from general overexposure. Also, right now, his throat was dry and aching for water.

He pulled himself up out of the leaves, stumbled to the edge of the pond and fell to hands and knees on its squashy margin. He drank; and as he raised his head and ran a wrist across his lips after quenching his thirst, the head of Binichi parted the surface almost where his lips had been.

"Time to go?" said the Lugh. He turned to one side and heaved himself up out onto the edge of the bank. "We'll leave in just a little while," Chuck said. "I'm not fully awake yet." He sat back stiffly and exhaustedly on the ground and stretched his arms out to bring some life back into them. He levered himself to his feet and walked up and down, swinging his arms. After a little while his protesting muscles began to warm a little and loosen. He got one of the high-calorie candy bars from his food pack and chewed on it.

"All right," he said. And the envoy turned to lead the way up, out of the glen.

With the bit of food, the exercise, and the new warmth of the sun, Chuck began to feel better as they proceeded. They were breasting the near slopes of the hills now, and shortly before noon they came over the top of them, and paused to rest.

The land did not drop again, but swelled away in a gently rising plateau, into distance. And on its far horizon, insubstantial as clouds, rose the blue peaks of mountains.

"Base is over those mountains," said Chuck.

"Will we have to cross them?" The envoy's translator produced the words evenly, like a casual and unimportant query.

"No." Chuck turned to the Tomah. "How far in from the coast have we come so far?"

"I would estimate" – the translator hesitated a second over the translation of units – "thirty-two and some fraction of a mile."

"Another sixty miles, then," said Chuck, "and we should be within the range of the airfoils they'll have out looking for us." He looked again at the mountains and they seemed to waver before his eyes. Reaching up in an automatic gesture to brush the waviness away, the back of his hand touched his forehead; and, startled, he pressed the hand against it. It was burning hot.

Feverish! thought Chuck. And his mind somersaulted at the impossibility of the fact.

He could see the two others looking at him with the completely remote and unempathetic curiosity of peoples who had nothing in common with either his life or his death. A small rat's-jaw of fear gnawed at him suddenly. It had never occurred to him since the crash that there could be any danger that he would not make it safely back to Base. Now, for the first time, he faced that possibility. If the worst came to the worst, it came home to him suddenly, he could count on no help from either the Tomah, or the Lugh.

"What will they look like, these airfoils?" asked Binichi.

"Like a circle made out of bright material," said Chuck. "A round platform about twelve feet across."

"And there will be others of your people in them?"

"On them. No," said Chuck. "Anyway, I don't think so. We're too short of personnel. They operate on remote-beamed power from the ship and flash back pictures of the ground they cover. Once they send back a picture of us, Base'll know where to find us."

He levered himself painfully to his feet. "Let's travel," he said.

They started out again. The walking was more level and easy now than it had been coming up through the hills. Plodding along, Chuck's eyes were suddenly attracted by a peculiarity of Binichi's back and sides. The Lugh was completely covered by a short close hair, which was snow-white under the belly, but shaded to a gray on the back. It seemed to Chuck, now, however, that this gray back hair had taken on a slight hint of rosiness.

"Hey!" he said, stopping. "You're getting sunburned."

The other two halted also; and Binichi looked up at him, inquiringly. Chuck repeated himself in simpler terms that his translator could handle.

"Let's go on," said Binichi, taking up the march again.

"Wait!" said Chuck, as he and the envoy moved to follow up the Lugh. "Don't you know that can be dangerous? Here –" He fumbled out of his own jacket. "We humans get sunburned, too, but we evidently aren't as susceptible as you. Now, I can tie the arms of this around your neck and you'll have some

protection –"

Binichi halted suddenly and wheeled to face the human.

"You're intruding," said Binichi, "on something that is my own concern."

"But –" Chuck looked helplessly at him. "The sun is quite strong in these latitudes. I don't think you understand –" He turned to appeal to the Tomah. "Tell him what the sun's like in a country like this."

"Surely," said the envoy, "this has nothing to do with you or me. If his health becomes imperfect, it will be an indication that he isn't fit to survive. He's only a Lugh; but certainly he has the right, like all living things, to make such a choice for himself."

"But he might be mistaken –"

"If he is mistaken, it will be a sign that he is unfit to survive. I don't agree with Lughs – as you people know. But any creature has the basic right to entertain death if he so wishes. To interfere with him in that would be the highest immorality."

"But don't you want to –" began Chuck, incredulously, turning toward the Lugh.

"Let's go on," said Binichi, turning away.

They went on again.

After a while, the grasslands of the early plateau gave way to more forest.

Chuck was plodding along in the late hours of the afternoon with his eyes on the ground a few feet in front of him and his head singing, when a new sound began to penetrate his consciousness. He listened to it, more idly than otherwise, for some seconds – and then abruptly, it registered.

It was a noise like yelping, back along the trail he had just passed.

He checked and straightened and turned about. Binichi was no longer in sight.

"Binichi!" he called. There was no answer, only the yelping. He began to run clumsily, back the way he had come.

Some eight or so yards back, he traced the yelping to a small clearing in a hollow. Breaking through the brush and trees that grew about its lip, he looked down on the Lugh. Binichi was braced at bay upon his clubbed tail, jaws agape, and turning to face half a dozen weasel-shaped creatures the size of small dogs that yelped and darted in and out at him, tearing and slashing.

The Lugh's sharp, tooth-studded jaws were more than a match for the jaws of any one of his attackers, but – here on land – they had many times his speed. No matter which way he turned, one was always at his back, and harrying him. But, like the envoy when he had been knocked into the sea, Binichi made no sound; and, although his eyes met those of Chuck, standing at the clearing edge, he gave no call for help.

Chuck looked about him desperately for a stick or stone he could use as a club. But the ground was bare of everything but the light wands of the bushes, and the trees overhead had all green, sound limbs firmly attached to their trunks. There was a stir in the bushes beside him.

Chuck turned and saw the envoy. He pushed through to stand beside Chuck, and also looked down at the fight going on in the clearing.

"Come on!" said Chuck, staring down into the clearing. Then he halted, for the envoy had not moved. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?" said the envoy, looking at him. "I don't understand."

"Those things will kill him!"

"You" – the envoy turned his head as if peering at Chuck – "appear to think we should interfere. You people have this strange attitude to the natural occurrences of life that I've noticed before."

"Do *you* people just stand by and watch each other get killed?"

"Of course not. Where another Tomah is concerned, it is of course different."

"He saved *your* life from those fish!" cried Chuck.

"I believe you asked him to. You were perfectly free to ask, just as he was perfectly free to accept or refuse. I'm in no way responsible for anything either of you have done."

"He's an intelligent being!" said Chuck, desperately. "Like you. Like me. We're all alike."

"Certainly we aren't," said the envoy, stiffening. "You and I are not at all alike, except that we are both civilized. He's not even that. He's a Lugh."

"I told him he'd promised to sit down at Base and discuss with you," cried Chuck, his tongue loosened by the fever. "I said he was dodging his promise if he let you die. And he went out and saved you. But you won't save him."

The envoy turned his head to look at Binichi, now all but swarmed under by the predators.

"Thank you for correcting me," he said. "I hadn't realized there could be honor in this Lugh."

He went down the slope of the hollow in a sudden, blurring rush that seemingly moved him off at top speed from a standing start. He struck the embattled group like a projectile and emerged coated by the predators. For a split second it seemed to Chuck that he had merely thrown another life into the jaws of the attackers. And then the Tomah claw glittered and flashed, right and left like a black scimitar, lightning-swift out of the ruck – and the clearing was emptied, except for four furry bodies that twitched or lay about the hollow.

The envoy turned to the nearest and began to eat. Without a glance or word directed at his rescuer, Binichi, bleeding from a score of superficial cuts and scratches, turned about and climbed slowly up the slope of the hollow to where Chuck stood.

"Shall we go on?" he said.

Chuck looked past him at the feeding envoy. "Perhaps we should wait for him," he said.

"Why?" said Binichi. "It's up to him to keep up, if he wants to. The Tomah is no concern of ours."

He headed off in the direction they had been going. Chuck wagged his head despairingly, and plodded after.

IV

The envoy caught up to them a little further on; and shortly after that, as the rays of the setting sun were beginning to level through the trees, giving the whole forest a cathedral look, they came on water, and stopped for the night.

It seemed to Chuck that the sun went down very quickly – quicker than it ever had before; and a sudden chill struck through to his very bones. Teeth chattering, he managed to start a fire and drag enough dead wood to it to keep it going while they slept.

Binichi had gone into the waters of the small lake a few yards off, and was not to be seen. But through the long, fever-ridden night hours that were a patchwork of dizzy wakefulness and dreams and half-dreams, Chuck was aware of the smooth, dark insect-like head of the Tomah watching him across the fire with what seemed to be an absorbing fascination.

Toward morning, he slept. He awoke to find the sun risen and Binichi already out of the lake. Chuck did not feel as bad, now, as he had earlier. He moved in a sort of fuzziness; and, although his body was slow responding, as if it was something operated by his mind from such a remote distance that mental directions to his limbs took a long time to be carried out, it was not so actively uncomfortable.

They led off, Chuck in the middle as before. They were moving out of the forest now, into more open country where the trees were interspersed with meadows. Chuck remembered now that he had not eaten in some time; but when he chewed on his food, the taste was uninteresting and he put it back in his pack.

Nor was he too clear about the country he was traversing. It was there all right, but it seemed more than a little unreal. Sometimes things, particularly things far off, appeared distorted. And he began remarking expressions on the faces of his two companions that he would not have believed physically possible to them. Binichi's mouth, in particular, had become remarkably mobile. It was no longer fixed by physiology into a grin. Watching out of the corner of his eye, Chuck caught glimpses of it twisted into all sorts of shapes: sad, sly, cheerful, frowning. And the Tomah was not much better. As the sun mounted up the clear arch of the sky, Chuck discovered the envoy squinting and winking at him, as if to convey some secret message.

"S'all right – s'all right –" mumbled Chuck. "I won't tell." And he giggled suddenly at the joke that he

couldn't tell because he really didn't know what all the winking was about.

"I don't understand," said the envoy, winking away like mad.

"S'all right – s'all right –" said Chuck.

He discovered after a time that the other two were no longer close beside him. Peering around, he finally located them walking together at some distance off from him. Discussing something, no doubt, something confidential. He wandered, taking the pitch and slope of the ground at random, stumbling a little now and then when the angle of his footing changed. He was aware in vague fashion that he had drifted into an area with little rises and unexpected sinkholes, their edges tangled with brush. He caught himself on one of the sinkholes, swayed back to safety, tacked off to his right . . .

Suddenly he landed hard on something. The impact drove all the air out of his lungs, so that he fought to breathe – and in that struggle he lost the cobwebs surrounding him for the first time that day.

He had not been aware of his fall, but now he saw that he lay half on his back, some ten feet down from the edge of one of the holes. He tried to get up, but one leg would not work. Panic cut through him like a knife.

"Help!" he shouted. His voice came out hoarse and strange-sounding. "Help!"

He called again; and after what seemed a very long time, the head of the envoy poked over the edge of the sinkhole and looked down at him.

"Get me out of here!" cried Chuck. "Help me out."

The envoy stared at him.

"Give me a hand!" said Chuck. "I can't climb up by myself. I'm hurt."

"I don't understand," said the envoy.

"I think my leg's broken. What's the matter with you?" Now that he had mentioned it, as if it had been lying there waiting for its cue, the leg that would not work sent a sudden, vicious stab of pain through him. And close behind this came a swelling agony that pricked Chuck to fury. "Don't you hear me? I said, pull me out of here! My leg's broken. I can't stand on it!"

"You are damaged?" said the envoy.

"Of course I'm damaged!"

The envoy stared down at Chuck for a long moment. When he spoke again, his words struck an odd, formalistic note in Chuck's fevered brain.

"It is regrettable," said the envoy, "that you are no longer in perfect health."

And he turned away, and disappeared. Above Chuck's straining eyes, the edges of the hole and the little patch of sky beyond them tilted, spun about like a scene painted on a whirling disk, and shredded away into nothingness.

At some time during succeeding events he woke up again; but nothing was really clear or certain until he found himself looking up into the face of Doc Burgis, who was standing over him, with a finger on his pulse.

"How do you feel?" said Burgis.

"I don't know," said Chuck. "Where am I?"

"Back at Base," said Burgis, letting go of his wrist. "Your leg is knitting nicely and we've knocked out your pneumonia. You've been under sedation. A couple more days' rest and you'll be ready to run again."

"That's nice," said Chuck; and went back to sleep.

V

Three days later he was recovered enough to take a ride in his motorized go-cart over to Roy Marlie's office. He found Roy there, and his uncle.

"Hi, Tommy," said Chuck, wheeling through the door. "Hi, Chief."

"How you doing, son?" asked Member Thomas Wagnall. "How's the leg?"

"Doc says I can start getting around on surgical splints in a day or two." Chuck looked at them both. "Well, isn't anybody going to tell me what happened?"

"Those two natives were carrying you when we finally located the three of you," said Tommy, "and we _"

"They were?" said Chuck.

"Why, yes." Tommy looked closely at him. "Didn't you know that?"

"I – I was unconscious before they started carrying me, I guess," said Chuck.

"At any rate, we got you all back here in good shape." Tommy went across the room to a built-in cabinet and came back carrying a bottle of scotch, capped with three glasses, and a bowl of ice. "Ready for that drink now?"

"Try me," said Chuck, not quite licking his lips. Tommy made a second trip for charged water and brought it back. He passed the drinks around.

"How," he said, raising his glass. They all drank in appreciative silence.

"Well," said Tommy, setting his glass down on the top of Roy's desk, "I suppose you heard about the conference." Chuck glanced over at Roy, who was evincing a polite interest.

"I heard they had a brief meeting and put everything off for a while," said Chuck.

"Until they had a chance to talk things over *between themselves*, yes," said Tommy. He was watching his nephew somewhat closely. "Rather surprising development. We hardly know where we stand now, do we?"

"Oh, I guess it'll work out all right," said Chuck.

"You do?"

"Why, yes," said Chuck. He slowly sipped at his glass again and held it up to the light of the window. "Good scotch."

"*All right!*" Tommy's thick fist came down with a sudden bang on the desk top. "I'll quit playing around. I may be nothing but a chairside Earth-lubber, but I'll tell you one thing. There's one thing I've developed in twenty years of politics and that's a nose for smells. And something about this situation smells! I don't know what, but it smells. And I want to find out what it is.

Chuck and Roy looked at each other.

"Why, Member," said Roy. "I don't follow you."

"You follow me all right," said Tommy. He took a gulp from his glass and blew out an angry breath. "All right – off the record. But tell me!"

Roy smiled.

"You tell him, Chuck," he said.

Chuck grinned in his turn.

"Well, I'll put it this way, Tommy," he said. "You remember how I explained the story about Big Brother Charlie that gave us the name for this project?"

"What about it?" said the Member.

"Maybe I didn't go into quite enough detail. You see," said Chuck, "the two youngest brothers were twins who lived right next door to each other in one town. They used to fight regularly until their wives got fed up with it. And when that happened, their wives would invite Big Brother Charlie from the next town to come and visit them."

Tommy was watching him with narrowed eyes. "What happened, of course," said Chuck, lifting his glass again, "was that after about a week, the twins weren't fighting each other at all." He drank.

"All right. All right," said Tommy. "I'll play straight man. Why weren't they fighting with each other?"

"Because," said Chuck, putting his glass back down again, "they were both too busy fighting with Big Brother Charlie."

Tommy stared for a long moment. Then he grunted and sat back in his chair, as if he had just had the wind knocked out of him.

"You see," said Roy, leaning forward over his desk, "what we were required to do here was something impossible. You just don't change centuries-old attitudes of distrust and hatred overnight. Trying to get the Lugh and the Tomah to like each other by any pressures we could bring to bear was like trying to move mountains with toothpicks. Too much mass for too little leverage. But we *could* change the attitudes of both of them toward us."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" demanded Tommy, glaring at him.

"Why, we might – and did – arrange for them to find out that, like the twins, they had more in common with each other than either one of them had with Big Brother Charlie. Not that we wanted them, God forbid, to unite in actively *fighting* Big Brother: We do need this planet as a space depot. But we wanted to make them see that they two form one unit – with us on the outside. They don't like each other any better now, but they've begun to discover a reason for hanging together."

"I'm not sure I follow you," said Tommy, dryly.

"What I'm telling you," said Roy, "is that we arranged a demonstration to bring home to them the present situation. They weren't prepared to share this world with each other. But when it came to their both sharing it with a third life form, they began to realize that the closer relative might see more eye-to-eye with them than the distant one. Chuck was under strict orders not to intervene, but to manage things so that each of them would be forced to solve the problems of the other, with no assistance from Earth or its technology."

"Brother," Chuck grunted, "the way it all worked out I didn't have to 'manage' a thing. The 'accident' was more thorough than we'd planned, and I was pretty much without the assistance of our glorious technology myself. Each of them had problems I couldn't have solved if I'd wanted to . . . but the other one could."

"Well," Roy nodded, "they are the natives, after all. We are the aliens. Just how alien, it was Chuck's job to demonstrate."

"You mean –" exploded Tommy, "that you threw away a half-million-dollar vehicle – that you made that crash-landing in the ocean – on purpose!"

"Off the record, Tommy," said Chuck, holding up a reminding finger. "As for the pot, it's on an undersea peak in forty fathoms. As soon as you can get us some more equipment it'll be duck soup to salvage it."

"Off the record be hanged!" roared Tommy. "Why, you might have killed them. You might have had one or the other species up in arms! You might –"

"We thought it was worth the risk," said Chuck mildly. "After all, remember I was sticking my own neck into the same dangers."

"You thought!" Tommy turned a seething glance on his nephew. He thrust himself out of his chair and stamped up and down the office in a visible effort to control his temper.

"Progress is not made by rules alone," misquoted Chuck complacently, draining the last scotch out of his glass. "Come back and sit down, Tommy. It's all over now."

The older man came glowering back and wearily plumped in his chair.

"All right," he said. "I said off the record, but I didn't expect this. Do you two realize what it is you've just done? Risked the lives of two vital members of intelligent races necessary to our future! Violated every principle of ordinary diplomacy in a hairbrained scheme that had nothing more than a wild notion to back it up! And to top it off, involved me – *me*, a Member of the Government! If this comes out nobody will ever believe I didn't know about it!"

"All right, Tommy," said Chuck. "We hear you. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

Earth District Member 439 Thomas L. Wagnall blew out a furious breath.

"Nothing!" he said, violently. "Nothing."

"That's what I thought," said Chuck. "Pass the scotch."

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DANGER – HUMAN

By Gordon R. Dickson

DANGER -- HUMAN, Astounding December 1957, (c) 1957 by Street & Smith Publications, Inc.

The spaceboat came down in the silence of perfect working Order--down through the cool, dark night of a New Hampshire lute spring. There was hardly any moon and the path emerging from the clump of conifers and snaking its way across the dim pasture looked like a long strip of pale cloth, carelessly dropped and forgotten there.

The two aliens checked the boat and stopped it, hovering, some fifty feet above the pasture, and all but invisible against the low-lying clouds. Then they set themselves to wait, their Woolly, bearlike forms settled on haunches, their uniform belts glinting a little in the shielded light from the instrument panel, talking now and then in desultory murmurs.

"It's not a bad place," said the one of junior rank, looking down at the earth below.

"Why should it be?" answered the senior.

The junior did not answer. He shifted on his haunches.

"The babies are due soon," he said. "I just got a message."

"How many?" asked the senior.

"Three--the doctor thinks. That's not bad for a first birthing."

"My wife only had two."

"I know. You told me."

They fell silent for a few seconds. The spaceboat rocked almost imperceptibly in the waters of night.

"Look--" said the junior, suddenly. "Here it comes, right on schedule."

The senior glanced overside. Down below, a tall, dark form had emerged from the trees and was coming out along the path. A little beam of light shone before him, terminating in a blob of illumination that danced along the path ahead, lighting his way. The senior stiffened.

"Take controls," he said. The casualness had gone out of his voice. It had become crisp, impersonal.

"Controls," answered the other, in the same emotionless voice.

"Take her down."

"Down it is."

The spaceboat dropped groundward. There was an odd sort of soundless, lightless explosion--it was as if concussive wave had passed, robbed of all effects but one. The figure dropped, the light rolling from its

grasp and losing its glow in a tangle of short grass. The spaceboat landed and the two aliens got out.

In the dark night they loomed furrily above the still figure. It was that of a lean, dark man in his early thirties, dressed inclean, much-washed corduroy pants and checkered wool lumber-jack shirt. He was unconscious, but breathing slowly, deeply andeasily.

"I'll take it up by the head, here," said the senior. "You take the other end. Got it? Lift! Now, carry it into the boat."

The junior backed away, up through the spaceboat's open lock, grunting a little with the awkwardness of his burden.

"It feels slimy," he said.

"Nonsense!" said the senior. "That's your imagination."

Eldridge Timothy Parker drifted in that dreamy limbo be-tween awakesness and full sleep. He found himself contemplat-ing his own name.

Eldridge Timothy Parker. Eldridgetimothyparker. EldridgeTIMOTHYparker.
ELdrlDGEtiMOthyPARKer. . . .

There was a hardness under his back, the back on which he was lying--and a coolness. His flaccid right hand turned flat, feeling. It felt like steel beneath him. Metal? He tried to sit up and bumped his forehead against a ceiling a few inches over-head. He blinked his eyes in the darkness--

Darkness?

He flung out his hands, searching, feeling terror leap up inside him. His knuckles bruised against walls to right and left. Frantic, his groping fingers felt out, around and about him. He was walled in, he was surrounded, he was enclosed.

Completely.

Like in a coffin.

Buried--

He began to scream. . . .

Much later, when he awoke again, he was in a strange place that seemed to have no walls, but many instruments. He floated in the center of mechanisms that passed and repassed about him, touching, probing, turning. He felt touches of heat and Cold. Strange hums and notes of various pitches came and went. He felt voices questioning him.

Who are you?

"Eldridge Parker-Eldridge Timothy Parker-"

What are you?

"I'm Eldridge Parker-"

Tell about yourself.

"Tell what? What?"

Tell about yourself.

"What? What do you want to know? What-"

Tell about. . . .

"But I--"

Tell. . .

. . . well, i suppose i was pretty much like any of the kids around our town . . . i was a pretty good shot and i won the fifth grade seventy-five yard dash . . . i played hockey, too . . . pretty cold weather up around our parts, you know, the air used to smell strange it was so cold winter mornings in January when you first stepped out of doors... it is good, open country, new england, and there were lots of smells . . . there were pine smells and grass smells and i remember especially the kitchen smells . . . and then, too, there was the way the oak benches in church used to smell on Sunday when you knelt with your nose right next to the back of the pew ahead. . . .

. . . the fishing up our parts is good too . . . i liked to fish but i never wasted time on weekdays... we were presbyterians, you know, and my father had the farm, but he also had money invested in land around the country... we have never been badly off but i would have liked a motor-scooter. . . .

...no i did not never hate the germans, at least i did not think i ever did, of course though i was over in europe i never really had it bad, combat, i mean . . . i was in a motor pool with the raw smell of gasoline, i like to work with my hands, and it was not like being in the infantry. . . .

. . . i have as good right to speak up to the town council as any man... i do not believe in pushing but if they push me i am going to push right back . . . nor it isn't any man's business what i voted last election no more than my bank balance . . . but i have got as good as right to a say in town doings as if i was the biggest landholder among them. . . .

. . . i did not go to college because it was not necessary . . . too much education can make a fool of any man, i told my father, and i know when i have had enough... i am a fanner and will always be a farmer and i will do my own studying as things come up without taking out a pure waste of four years to hang a piece of paper on the wall. . . .

...of course i know about the atom bomb, but i am no scientist and no need to be one, no more than i need to be a veterinarian . . . i elect the men that hire the men that need to know those things and the men that i elect will hear from me johnny-quick if things do not go to my liking. . . .

...as to why i never married, that is none of your business... as it happens, i was never at ease with women much, though there were a couple of times, and i still may if jeanie lind. . . .

. . . i believe in god and the united states of america. . . .

He woke up gradually. He was in a room that might have been any office, except the furniture was different. That is, there was a box with doors on it that might have been a filing cabinet and a table that looked like a desk in spite of the single thin rod underneath the center that supported it. However, there were no chairs-only small, flat cushions, on which three large woolly, bearlike creatures were sitting and watching him in silence.

He himself, he found, was in a chair, though.

As soon as they saw his eyes were open, they turned away from him and began to talk among themselves. Eldridge Parkershook his head and blinked his eyes, and would have blinked his ears if that had been possible. For the sounds the creatures were making were like nothing he had ever heard before; and yet he understood everything they were saying. It was an odd sensation, like a double-image earwise, for he heard the strange mouth-noises just as they came out and then something in his head twisted them around and made them into perfectly understandable English.

Nor was that all. For, as he sat listening to the creatures talk, he began to get the same double image in another way. That is, he still saw the bearlike creature behind the desk as the weird sort of animal he was, out of the sound of his voice, or from something else, there gradually built up in Eldridge's mind a picture of a thin, rather harassed-looking gray-haired man in something resembling a uniform, but at the same time not quite a uniform. It was the sort of effect an army general might get if he wore his stars and a Sam Browne belt over a civilian double-breasted suit. Similarly, the other creature sitting facing the one behind the desk, at the desk's side, was a young and black-haired man with something of the laboratory about him, and the creature further back, seated almost against the wall, was neither soldier nor scientist, but a heavy older man with a sort of book-won wisdom in him.

"You see, commander," the young one with the black-haired image was saying, "perfectly restored. At least on the physical and mental levels."

"Good, doctor, good," the outlandish syllables from the one behind the desk translated themselves in Eldridge's head. "And you say it... he, I should say... will be able to understand?"

"Certainly, sir," said the doctor-psychologist-whatever-he-was. "Identification *is* absolute--"

"But I mean comprehend-encompass--" The creature behind the desk moved one paw slightly. "Follow what we tell him--"

The doctor turned his ursinoid head toward the third member of the group. This one spoke slowly, in a deeper voice.

"The culture allows. Certainly."

The one behind the desk bowed slightly to the oldest one.

"Certainly, Academician, certainly."

They then fell silent, all looking back at Eldridge, who re-turned their gaze with equivalent interest. There was something unnatural about the whole proceeding. Both sides were regarding the other with the completely blunt and unshielded curiosity given to freaks.

The silence stretched out. It became tinged with a certain embarrassment. Gradually a mutual recognition arose that no one really wanted to be the first to address an alien being directly.

"It... he is comfortable?" asked the commander, turning once more to the doctor.

"I should say so," replied the doctor, slowly. "As far as we know. . . ."

Turning back to Eldridge, the commander said, "Eldridge-timothyparker, I suppose you wonder where you are?"

Caution and habit put a clamp on Eldridge's tongue. He hesitated about answering so long that the commander turned in distress to the doctor, who reassured him with a slight movement of the head.

"Well, speak up," said the commander, "we'll be able to understand you, just as you're able to understand us. Nothing's going to hurt you; and anything you say won't have the slightest effect on your... er... situation."

He paused again, looking at Eldridge for a comment. Eldridge still held his silence, but one of his hands unconsciously made a short, fumbling motion at his breast pocket.

"My pipe--" said Eldridge.

The three looked at each other. They looked back at Eldridge.

"We have it," said the doctor. "After a while we may give it back to you. For now... we cannot allow... it would not suit us."

"Smoke bother you?" said Eldridge, with a touch of his native canniness.

"It does not bother us. It is... merely . . . distasteful," said the commander. "Let's get on. I'm going to tell you where you are, first. You're on a world roughly similar to your own, but many . . ." he hesitated, looking at the academician.

"Light-years," supplemented the deep voice.

". . . Light-years in terms of what a year means to you," went on the commander, with growing briskness. "Many light-years distant from your home. We didn't bring you here because of any personal . . . dislike... or enmity for you; but for...."

"Observation," supplied the doctor. The commander turned and bowed slightly to him, and was bowed back at in return.

". . . Observation," went on the commander. "Now, do you understand what I've told you so far?"

"I'm listening," said Eldridge.

"Very well," said the commander. "I will go on. There is something about your people that we are very anxious to discover. We have been, and intend to continue, studying you to find it out. So far-I will admit quite frankly and freely-we have not found it; and the consensus among our best minds is that you, yourself, do not know what it is. Accordingly, we have hopes of... causing . . . you to discover it for yourself. And for us."

"Hey. . . ." breathed Eldridge.

"Oh, you will be well treated. I assure you," said the commander, hurriedly. "You have been well treated. You have been . . . but you did not know... I mean you did not feel--"

"Can you remember any discomfort since we picked you up?" asked the doctor, leaning forward.

"Depends what you mean--"

"And you will feel none." The doctor turned to the commander. "Perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself?"

"Perhaps," said the commander. He bowed and turned back to Eldridge. "To explain-we hope you will discover our answer for it. We're only going to put you in a position to work on it. Therefore, we've decided to tell you everything. First-the problem. Academician?"

The oldest one bowed. His deep voice made the room ring oddly.

"If you will look this way," he said. Eldridge turned his head. The other raised one paw and the wall beside him dissolved into a maze of lines and points. "Do you know what this is?"

"No," said Eldridge.

"It is," rumbled the one called the academician, "a map of the known universe. You lack the training to read it in four dimensions, as it should be read. No matter. You will take my word for it... it is a map. A map covering hundreds of thousands of your light-years and millions of your years."

He looked at Eldridge, who said nothing.

"To go on, then. What we know of your race is based upon two sources of information. History. And Legend. The history is sketchy. It rests on archaeological discoveries for the most part. The legend is even sketchier and-fantastic."

He paused again. Still Eldridge guarded his tongue.

"Briefly, there is a race that has three times broken out to overrun this mapped area of our galaxy and dominate other civilized cultures-until some inherent lack or weakness in the individual caused the component parts of this advance to die out. The periods of these outbreaks has always been disastrous for the dominated cultures and uniformly without benefit to the race I am talking about. In the case of each outbreak, though the home planet was destroyed and all known remnants of the advancing race hunted out, unknown seed communities remained to furnish the material for a new advance some

thousands of years later. That race," said the academician, and coughed--or at least made some kind of noise in his throat, "is your own."

Eldridge watched the other carefully and without moving.

"We see your race, therefore," went on the academician, and Eldridge received the mental impression of an elderly man putting the tips of his fingers together judiciously, "as one with great or overwhelming natural talents, but unfortunately also with one great natural flaw. This flaw seems to be a desire--almost a need--to acquire and possess things. To reach out, encompass, and absorb. It is not," shrugged the academician, "a unique trait. Other races have it-but not to such an extent that it makes them a threat to their co-existing cultures. Yet, this in itself is not the real problem. If it was a simple matter of rapacity, a combination of other races should be able to contain your people. There is a natural inevitable balance of that sort continually at work in the galaxy. No," said the academician, and paused, looking at the commander.

"Go on. Go on," said the commander. The academician bowed.

"No, it is not that simple. As a guide to what remains, we have only the legend, made anew and reinforced after each outward sweep of you people. We know that there must be something more than we have found--and we have studied you carefully, both your home world and now you, personally. There *must* be something more in you, some genius, some capability above the normal, to account for the fantastic nature of your race's previous successes. But the legend says only-- *Danger, Human! High Explosive. Do not touch* --and we find nothing in you to justify the warning."

He sighed. Or at least Eldridge received a sudden, unexpected intimation of deep weariness.

"Because of a number of factors--too numerous to go into and most of them not understandable to you--it is our race which must deal with this problem for the rest of the galaxy. What can we do? We dare not leave you be until you grow strong and come out once more. And the legend expressly warns us against touching you in any way. So we have chosen to pick one--but I intrude upon your field, doctor."

The two of them exchanged bows. The doctor took up the talk speaking briskly and entirely to Eldridge.

"A joint meeting of those of us best suited to consider the situation recommended that we pick up one specimen for intensive observation. For reasons of availability, you were the one chosen. Following your return under drugs to this planet, you were thoroughly examined, by the best of medical techniques, both mentally and physically. I will not go into detail, since we have no wish to depress you unduly. I merely want to impress on you the fact that we found nothing. Nothing. No unusual power or ability of any sort, such as history shows you to have had and legend hints at. I mention this because of the further course of action we have decided to take. Commander?"

The being behind the desk got to his hind feet. The other two rose.

"You will come with us," said the commander.

Herded by them, Eldridge went out through the room's door into brilliant sunlight and across a small stretch of something like concrete to a stubby egg-shaped craft with ridiculous little wings.

"Inside," said the commander. They got in. The commandersquatted before a bank of instruments, manipulated a sim-ple sticklike control, and after a moment the ship took to theair. They flew for perhaps half an hour, with Eldridge wishing he was in a position to see out one of the high windows, thenlanded at a field apparently literally hacked out of a small forest of mountains.

Crossing this field on foot, Eldridge got a glimpse of some truly huge ships, as well as a number of smaller ones such as the one in which he had arrived. Numbers of the furry aliens moved about, none with any great air of hurry, but all with purposefulness. There was a sudden, single, thunderous sound that was gone almost before the ear could register it; and Eldridge, who had ducked instinctively, looked up again to see one of the huge ships falling--there is no other word for it--skyward with such unbelievable rapidity it was out of sight in seconds.

The four of them came at last to a shallow, open trench in the stuff which made the field surface. It was less than a foot wide and they stepped across it with ease. But once they had crossed it, Eldridge noticed a difference. In the five hundred yard square enclosed by the trench--for it turned at right angles off to his right and to his left--there was an air of tightly-established desertedness, as of some highly restricted area, and the rectangular concrete-looking building that occupied the square's very center glittered unoccupied in the clear light.

They marched to the door of this building and it opened without any of them touching it. Inside was perhaps twenty feet of floor, stretching inward as a rim inside the walls. Then a sort of moat--Eldridge could not see its depth--filled with a dark fluid with a faint, sharp odor. This was perhaps another twenty feet wide and enclosed a small, flat island perhaps fifteen feet by fifteen feet, almost wholly taken up by a cage whose walls and ceiling appeared to be made of metal bars as thick as a man's thumb and spaced about six inches apart. Two more of the aliens, wearing a sort of harness and holding a short, black tube apiece, stood on the ledge of the outer rim. A temporary bridge had been laid across the moat, protruding through the open door of the cage.

They all went across the bridge and into the cage. There, standing around rather like a board of directors viewing an addition to the company plant, they faced Eldridge; and the commander spoke.

"This will be your home from now on," he said. He indicated the cot, the human-type chair and the other items furnishing the cage. "It's as comfortable as we can make it."

"Why?" burst out Eldridge, suddenly. "Why're you locking me up here? Why--"

"In our attempt to solve the problem that still exists," interrupted the doctor, smoothly, "we can do nothing more than keep you under observation and hope that time will work with us. Also, we hope to influence you to search for the solution, yourself."

"And if I find it--what?" cried Eldridge. "Then," said the commander, "we will deal with you in the kindest manner that the solution permits. It may be even possible to return you to your own world. At the very least, once you are no longer needed, we can see to it that you are quickly and painlessly destroyed."

Eldridge felt his insides twist within him.

"Kill me?" he choked. "You think that's going to make me help you? The hope of getting killed?"

They looked at him almost compassionately. "You may find," said the doctor, "that death may be some-thing you will want very much, only for the purpose' of putting a close to a life you've become weary of. Look,"--he gestured around him--"you are locked up beyond any chance of ever escaping. This cage will be illuminated night and day; and you will be locked in it. When we leave, the bridge will be with-drawn, and the only thing crossing that moat--which is filled with acid--will be a mechanical arm which will extend across and through a small opening to bring you food twice a day. Beyond the moat, there will be two armed guards on duty at all times, but even they cannot open the door to this build-ing. That is opened by remote control from outside, only after the operator has checked on his vision screen to make sure all is as it should be inside here."

He gestured through the bars, across the moat and through a window in the outer wall.

"Look out there," he said.

Eldridge looked. Out beyond, and surrounding the building, the shallow trench no longer lay still and empty under the sun. It now spouted a vertical wall of flickering, weaving dis-tortion, like a barrier of heat waves.

"That is our final defense, the ultimate in destructiveness that our science provides us--it would literally burn you to nothingness, if you touched it. It will be turned off only forseconds, and with elaborate precautions, to let guards in, or out."

Eldridge looked back in, to see them all watching him.

"We do this," said the doctor, "not only because we may discover you to be more dangerous than you seem, but to impress you with your helplessness so that you may be more ready to help us. Here you are, and here you will stay."

"And you think," demanded Eldridge hoarsely, "that this's all going to make me want to help you?"

"Yes," said the doctor, "because there's one thing more that enters into the situation. You were literally taken apart physi-cally, after your capture; and as literally put back together again. We are advanced in the organic field, and certain things are true of all life forms. I supervised the work on you, myself. You will find that you are, for all practical purposes immortal and irretrievably sane. This will be your home forever, and you will find that neither death nor insanity will provide you away of escape."

They turned and filed out. From some remote control, the cage door was swung shut. He heard it click and lock. The bridge was withdrawn from the moat. A screen lit up and a woolly face surveyed the building's interior.

The building's door opened. They went out; and the guardstook up their patrol, around the rim in opposite directions, keep- ing their eyes on Eldridge and their weapons ready in their hands. The building's door closed again. Outside, the flickering wall blinked out for a second and then returned again.

The silence of a warm, summer, mountain afternoon descended upon the building. The footsteps of the guards madeshuffling noises on their path around the rim. The bars enclosedhim.

Eldridge stood still, holding the bars in both hands and looking out.

He could not believe it.

He could not believe it as the days piled up into weeks and the weeks into months. But as the seasons shifted and the *year* came around to a new year, the realities of his situation began to soak into him like water into a length of dock piling. For outside, Time could be seen at its visible and regular motion; but in his prison, there was no Time.

Always, the lights burned overhead, always the guards paced about him. Always the barrier burned beyond the building, the meals came swinging in on the end of a long metal arm extended over the moat and through a small hatchway which opened automatically as the arm approached; regularly, twice weekly, the doctor came and checked him over, briefly, impersonally-and went out again with the changing of the guard.

He felt the unbearableness of his situation, like a hand winding tighter and tighter day by day the spring of tension within him. He took to pacing feverishly up and down the cage. He went back and forth, back and forth, until the room swam. He lay awake nights, staring at the endless glow of illumination from the ceiling. He rose to pace again.

The doctor came and examined him. He talked to Eldridge, but Eldridge would not answer. Finally there came a day when everything split wide open and he began to howl and bang on the bars. The guards were frightened and called the doctor. The doctor came, and with two others, entered the cage and strapped him down. They did something odd that hurt at the back of his neck and he passed out.

When he opened his eyes again, the first thing he saw was the doctor's woolly face, looking down at him-he had learned to recognize that countenance in the same way a sheep-herder eventually comes to recognize individual sheep in his flock. Eldridge felt very weak, but calm.

"You tried hard--" said the doctor. "But you see, you didn't make it. There's no way out *that* way for you."

Eldridge smiled.

"Stop that!" said the doctor sharply. "You aren't fooling us. We know you're perfectly rational."

Eldridge continued to smile.

"What do you think you're doing?" demanded the doctor. Eldridge looked happily up at him.

"I'm going home," he said.

"I'm sorry," said the doctor. "You don't convince me." He turned and left. Eldridge turned over on his side and dropped off into the first good sleep he'd had in months.

In spite of himself, however, the doctor was worried. He had the guards doubled, but nothing happened. The days slipped into weeks again and nothing happened. Eldridge was apparently fully recovered. He still spent a great deal of time walking up and down his cage and grasping the bars as if to pull them out of the way before him-but the frenzy of his earlier pacing was gone. He had also moved his cot over next to the small, two-foot square hatch that opened to admit the mechanical arm bearing his meals, and would lie there, with his face pressed against it, waiting for the food to be delivered. The

doctor felt uneasy, and spoke to the commander privately about it.

"Well," said the commander, "just what is it you suspect?"

"I don't know," confessed the doctor. "It's just that I see him more frequently than any of us. Perhaps I've become sensitized-but he bothers me."

"Bothers you?"

"Frightens me, perhaps. I wonder if we've taken the right way with him."

"We took the only way." The commander made the little gesture and sound that was his race's equivalent of a sigh. "We must have data. What do you do when you run across a possibly dangerous virus, doctor? You isolate it-for study, until you know. It is not possible, and too risky to try to study his race at close hand, so we study him. That's all we're doing. You lose Objectivity, doctor. Would you like to take a short vacation?"

"No," said the doctor, slowly. "No. But he frightens me."

Still, time went on and nothing happened. Eldridge paced his cage and lay on his cot, face pressed to the bars of the hatch, and staring at the outside world. Another year passed; and another. The double guards were withdrawn. The doctor came reluctantly to the conclusion that the human had at last accepted the fact of his confinement and felt growing within him that normal sort of sympathy that feeds on familiarity. He tried to talk to Eldridge on his regularly scheduled visits, but Eldridge showed little interest in conversation. He lay on the cot watching the doctor as the doctor examined him, with something in his eyes as if he looked on from some distant place in which all decisions were already made and finished.

"You're as healthy as ever," said the doctor, concluding his examination. He regarded Eldridge. "I wish you would, though. . . ." He broke off. "We aren't a cruel people, you know. We don't like the necessity that makes us do this." He paused. Eldridge considered him without stirring.

"If you'd accept that fact," said the doctor, "I'm sure you'd make it easier on yourself. Possibly our figures of speech have given you a false impression. We said you are immortal. Well, of course, that's not true. Only practically speaking are you immortal. You are now capable of living a very, very, very long time. That's all."

He paused again. After a moment of waiting, he went on.

"Just the same way, this business isn't really intended to go on for eternity. By its very nature, of course, it can't. Even races have a finite lifetime. But even that would be too long. No, it's just a matter of a long time as you might live it. Eventually, everything must come to a conclusion-that's in-avoidable."

Eldridge still did not speak. The doctor sighed.

"Is there anything you'd like?" he said. "We'd like to make this as little unpleasant as possible. Anything we can give you?"

Eldridge opened his mouth.

"Give me a boat," he said. "I want a fishing rod. I want a bottle of applejack."

The doctor shook his head sadly. He turned and signaled the guards. The cage door opened. He went out.

"Get me some pumpkin pie," cried Eldridge after him, sitting up on the cot and grasping the bars as the door closed. "Give me some green grass in here."

The doctor crossed the bridge. The bridge was lifted up and the monitor screen lit up. A woolly face looked out and saw that all was well. Slowly the outer door swung open.

"Get me some pine trees!" yelled Eldridge at the doctor's re-treating back. "Get me some plowed fields! Get me some earth, some dirt, some plain, earth dirt! *Get me that!*"

The door shut behind the doctor; and Eldridge burst into laughter, clinging to the bars, hanging there with glowing eyes.

"I would like to be relieved of this job," said the doctor to the commander, appearing formally in the latter's office.

"I'm sorry," said the commander. "I'm very sorry. But it was our tactical team that initiated this action; and no one has the experience with the prisoner you have. I'm sorry."

The doctor bowed his head; and went out.

Certain mild but emotion-deadening drugs were also known to the woolly, bearlike race. The doctor went out and began to indulge in them. Meanwhile, Eldridge lay on his cot, occasionally smiling to himself. His position was such that he could see out the window and over the weaving curtain of the barrier that ringed his building, to the landing field. After a while one of the large ships landed and when he saw the three members of its crew disembark from it and move, antlike off across the field toward the buildings at its far end, he smiled again.

He settled back and closed his eyes. He seemed to doze for a couple of hours and then the sound of the door opening to admit the extra single guard bearing the food for his three o'clock mid-afternoon feeding. He sat up, pushed the cot down a ways, and sat on the end of it, waiting for the meal.

The bridge was not extended—that happened only when some-one physically was to enter his cage. The monitor screen lit up and a woolly face watched as the tray of food was loaded on the mechanical arm. It swung out across the acid-filled moat, stretched itself toward the cage, and under the vigilance of the face in the monitor, the two-foot square hatch opened just before it to let it extend into the cage.

Smiling, Eldridge took the tray. The arm withdrew, as it cleared the cage, the hatch swung shut and locked. Outside the cage, guards, food carrier and face in the monitor relaxed. The food carrier turned toward the door, the face in the monitor looked down at some invisible control board before it and the outer door swung open.

In that moment, Eldridge moved.

In one swift second he was on his feet and his hands had closed around the bars of the hatch. There

was a single screech of metal, as—incredibly—he tore it loose and threw it aside. Then he was diving through the hatch opening.

He rolled head over heels like a gymnast and came up with his feet standing on the inner edge of the moat. The acrid scent of the acid faintly burnt at his nostrils. He sprang forward in a standing jump, arms outstretched—and his clutching fingers closed on the end of the food arm, now halfway in the process of its leisurely mechanical retraction across the moat.

The metal creaked and bent, dipping downward toward the acid, but Eldridge was already swinging onward under the powerful impetus of his arms from which the sleeves had fallen back to reveal bulging ropes of smooth, powerful muscle. He flew forward through the air, feet first, and his boots took the nearest guard in the face, so that they crashed to the ground together.

For a second they rolled entangled, then the guard flopped and Eldridge came up on one knee, holding the black tube of the guard's weapon. It spat a single tongue of flame and the other guard dropped. Eldridge thrust to his feet, turning to the still-open door.

The door was closing. But the panicked food-carrier, unarmed, had turned to run. A bolt from Eldridge's weapon took him in the back. He fell forward and the door jammed on his body. Leaping after him, Eldridge squeezed through the remaining opening.

Then he was out under the free sky. The sounds of alarm screechers were splitting the air. He began to run--

The doctor was already drugged--but not so badly that he could not make it to the field when the news came. Driven by a strange perversity of spirit, he went first to the prison to inspect the broken hatch and the bent food arm. He traced Eldridge's outward path and it led him to the landing field where he found the commander and the academician by a bare, darkened area of concrete. They acknowledged his presence by little bows.

"He took a ship here?" said the doctor.

"He took a ship here," said the commander.

There was a little silence between them.

"Well," said the academician, "we have been answered."

"Have we?" the commander looked at them almost appealingly. "There's no chance--that it was just chance? No chance that the hatch just happened to fail--and he acted without thinking, and was lucky?"

The doctor shook his head. He felt a little dizzy and unnatural from the drug, but the ordinary processes of his thinking were unimpaired.

"The hinges of the hatch," he said, "were rotten-eaten away by acid."

"Acid?" the commander stared at him. "Where would he get acid?"

"From his own digestive processes--regurgitated and spat directly into the hinges. He secreted hydrochloric acid among other things. Not too powerful--but over a period of time. . . ."

"Still--" said the commander, desperately, "I think it must have been more luck than otherwise."

"Can you believe that?" asked the academician. "Consider the timing of it all, the choosing of a moment when the food arm was in the proper position, the door open at the proper angle, the guard in a vulnerable situation. Consider his unhesitating and sure use of a weapon-which could only be the fruits of hours of observation, his choice of a moment when a fully supplied ship, its drive unit not yet cooled down, was waiting for him on the field. No," he shook his woolly head, "we have been answered. We put him in an escape-proof prison and he escaped."

"But none of this was possible!" cried the commander. The doctor laughed, a fuzzy, drug-blurred laugh. He opened his mouth but the academician was before him.

"It's not what he did," said the academician, "but the fact that he did it. No member of another culture that we know would have even entertained the possibility in their minds. Don't you see--he disregarded, he *denied* the fact that escape was impossible. *That* is what makes his kind so fearful, so dangerous. The fact that something is impossible presents no barrier to their seeking minds. That, alone, places them above us on a plane we can never reach."

"But it's a false premise!" protested the commander. "They cannot contravene natural laws. They are still bound by the physical order of the universe."

The doctor laughed again. His laugh had a wild quality. The commander looked at him.

"You're drugged," he said.

"Yes," choked the doctor. "And I'll be more drugged. I toast the end of our race, our culture, and our order."

"Hysteria!" said the commander.

"Hysteria?" echoed the doctor. "No-- *guilt*! Didn't we do it, we three? The legend told us not to touch them, not to set a spark to the explosive mixture of their kind. And we went ahead and did it, you, and you, and I. And now we've sent forth an enemy-safely into the safe hiding place of space, in a ship that can take him across the galaxy, supplied with food to keep him for years, rebuilt into a body that will not die, with star charts and all the keys to understand our culture and locate his home again, using the ability to learn we have encouraged in him."

"I say," said the commander, doggedly, "he is not that dangerous-yet. So far he has done nothing one of us could not do, had we entertained the notion. He's shown nothing, nothing supernatural."

"Hasn't he?" said the doctor thickly. "What about the defensive screen-our most dangerous most terrible weapon-that could burn him to nothingness if he touched it?"

The commander stared at him.

"But-" said the commander. "The screen was shut off, of course, to let the food carrier out, at the same time the door was opened. I assumed--"

"I checked," said the doctor, his eyes burning on the commander. "They turned it on again before he could get out."

"But he *did* get out! You don't mean . . ." the commander's voice faltered and dropped. The three stood caught in a suddensilence like stone. Slowly, as if drawn by strings controlled by a n invisible hand, they turned as one to stare up into the emptysky and space beyond.

"You mean--" the commander's voice tried again, and died.

"Exactly!" whispered the doctor.

Halfway across the galaxy, a child of a sensitive race cried out in its sleep and clutched at its mother.

"I had a bad dream," it whimpered.

"Hush," said its mother. "Hush." But she lay still, staring at the ceiling. She, too, had dreamed.

Somewhere, Eldridge was smiling at the stars.

Define intelligence . . . without defining yourself.

DOLPHIN'S WAY

Of course, there was no reason why a woman coming to Dolphin's Way – as the late Dr. Edwin Knight had named the island research station – should not be beautiful. But Mal had never expected such a thing to happen.

Castor and Pollux had not come to the station pool this morning. They might have left the station, as other wild dolphins had in the past – and Mal nowadays carried always with him the fear that the Willernie Foundation would seize on some excuse to cut off their funds for further research. Ever since Corwin Brayt had taken over, Mal had known this fear. Though Brayt had said nothing. It was only a feeling Mal got from the presence of the tall, cold man. So it was that Mal was out in front of the station, scanning the ocean when the water-taxi from the mainland brought the visitor.

She stepped out on the dock, as he stared down at her. She waved as if she knew him, and then climbed the stairs from the dock to the terrace in front of the door to the main building of the station.

"Hello," she said, smiling as she stopped in front of him. "You're Corwin Brayt?"

Mal was suddenly sharply conscious of his own lean and ordinary appearance in contrast to her startling beauty. She was brown-haired and tall for a girl – but these things did not describe her. There was a perfection to her – and her smile stirred him strangely.

"No," he said. "I'm Malcolm Sinclair. Corwin's inside."

"I'm Jane Wilson," she said. " *Background Monthly* sent me out to do a story on the dolphins. Do you work with them?"

"Yes," Mal said. "I started with Dr. Knight in the beginning."

"Oh, good," she said. "Then, you can tell me some things. You were here when Dr. Brayt took charge after Dr. Knight's death?"

"Mr. Brayt," he corrected automatically. "Yes." The emotion she moved in him was so deep and strong it seemed she must feel it too. But she gave no sign.

"Mr. Brayt?" she echoed. "Oh. How did the staff take to him?"

"Well," said Mal, wishing she would smile again, "everyone took to him."

"I see," she said. "He's a good research head?"

"A good administrator," said Mal. "He's not involved in the research end."

"He's not?" She stared at him. "But didn't he replace Dr. Knight, after Dr. Knight's death?"

"Why, yes," said Mal. He made an effort to bring his attention back to the conversation. He had never had a woman affect him like this before. "But just as administrator of the station, here. You see – most of our funds for work here come from the Willernie Foundation. They had faith in Dr. Knight, but when he died . . . well, they wanted someone of their own in charge. None of us mind."

"Willernie Foundation," she said. "I don't know it."

"It was set up by a man named Willernie, in St. Louis, Missouri," said Mal. "He made his money manufacturing kitchen utensils. When he died he left a trust and set up the Foundation to encourage basic research." Mal smiled. "Don't ask me how he got from kitchen utensils to that. That's not much information for you, is it?"

"It's more than I had a minute ago," she smiled back. "Did you know Corwin Brayt before he came here?"

"No." Mal shook his head. "I don't know many people outside the biological and zoological fields."

"I imagine you know him pretty well now, though, after the six months he's been in charge."

"Well –" Mal hesitated, "I wouldn't say I know him well, at all. You see, he's up here in the office all day long and I'm down with Pollux and Castor – the two wild dolphins we've got coming to the station, now. Corwin and I don't see each other much."

"On this small island?"

"I suppose it seems funny – but we're both pretty busy."

"I guess you would be," she smiled again. "Will you take me to him?"

"Him?" Mal awoke suddenly to the fact they were still standing on the terrace. "Oh, yes – it's Corwin you came to see."

"Not just Corwin," she said. "I came to see the whole place."

"Well, I'll take you in to the office. Come along."

He led her across the terrace and in through the front door into the air-conditioned coolness of the interior. Corwin Brayt ran the air conditioning constantly, as if his own somewhat icy personality demanded the dry, distant coldness of a mountain atmosphere. Mal led Jane Wilson down a short corridor and through another door into a large wide-windowed office. A tall, slim, broad-shouldered man with black hair and a brown, coldly handsome face looked up from a large desk, and got to his feet on seeing Jane.

"Corwin," said Mal. "This is Miss Jane Wilson from *Background Monthly*."

"Yes," said Corwin expressionlessly to Jane, coming around the desk to them. "I got a wire yesterday you were coming." He did not wait for Jane to offer her hand, but offered his own. Their fingers met.

"I've got to be getting down to Castor and Pollux," said Mal, turning away.

"I'll see you later then," Jane said, looking over at him.

"Why, yes. Maybe –" he said. He went out. As he closed the door of Brayt's office behind him, he paused for a moment in the dim, cool hallway, and shut his eyes. *Don't be a fool*, he told himself, *a girl like that can do a lot better than someone like you. And probably has already.*

He opened his eyes and went back down to the pool behind the station and the nonhuman world of the dolphins.

When he got there, he found that Castor and Pollux were back. Their pool was an open one, with egress to the open blue waters of the Caribbean. In the first days of the research at Dolphin's Way, the dolphins had been confined in a closed pool like any captured wild animal. It was only later on, when the work at the station had come up against what Knight had called "the environmental barrier," that the notion was conceived of opening the pool to the sea, so that the dolphins they had been working with could leave or stay, as they wished.

They had left – but they had come back. Eventually, they had left for good. But strangely, wild dolphins had come from time to time to take their place, so that there were always dolphins at the station.

Castor and Pollux were the latest pair. They had showed up some four months ago after a single dolphin frequenting the station had disappeared. Free, independent – they had been most cooperative. But the barrier had not been breached.

Now, they were sliding back and forth past each other underwater utilizing the full thirty-yard length of the pool, passing beside, over, and under each other, their seven-foot, nearly identical bodies almost, but not quite, rubbing as they passed. The tape showed them to be talking together up in the supersonic range, eighty to a hundred and twenty kilocycles per second. Their pattern of movement in the water now was something he had never seen before. It was regular and ritualistic as a dance.

He sat down and put on the earphones connected to the hydrophones, underwater at each end of the pool. He spoke into the microphone, asking them about their movements, but they ignored him and kept on with the patterned swimming.

The sound of footsteps behind him made him turn.

He saw Jane Wilson approaching down the concrete steps from the back door of the station, with the stocky, overalled figure of Pete Adant, the station mechanic.

"Here he is," said Pete, as they came up. "I've got to get back, now."

"Thank you." She gave Pete the smile that had so moved Mal earlier. Pete turned and went back up the steps. She turned to Mal. "Am I interrupting something?"

"No. He took off the earphones. "I wasn't getting any answers, anyway."

She looked at the two dolphins in their underwater dance with the liquid surface swirling above them as they turned now this way, now that, just under it.

"Answers?" she said. He smiled a little ruefully.

"We call them answers," he, said. He nodded at the two smoothly streamlined shapes turning in the pool. "Sometimes we can ask questions and get responses."

"Informative responses?" she asked.

"Sometimes. You wanted to see me about something?"

"About everything," she said. "It seems you're the man I came to talk to – not Brayt. He sent me down here. I understand you're the one with the theory."

"Theory?" he said warily, feeling his heart sink inside him.

"The notion, then," she said. "The idea that, if there is some sort of interstellar civilization, it might be waiting for the people of Earth to qualify themselves before making contact. And that test might not be a technological one like developing a faster-than-light means of travel, but a sociological one –"

"Like learning to communicate with an alien culture – a culture like that of the dolphins," he interrupted harshly. "Corwin told you this?"

"I'd heard about it before I came," she said. "I'd thought it was Brayt's theory, though."

"No," said Mal, "it's mine." He looked at her. "You aren't laughing."

"Should I laugh?" she said. She was attentively watching the dolphins' movements. Suddenly he felt sharp jealousy of them for holding her attention; and the emotion pricked him to something he might not otherwise have had the courage to do.

"Fly over to the mainland with me," he said, "and have lunch. I'll tell you all about it."

"All right." She looked up from the dolphins at him at last and he was surprised to see her frowning. "There's a lot I don't understand," she murmured. "I thought it was Brayt I had to learn about. But it's you – and the dolphins."

"Maybe we can clear that up at lunch, too," Mal said, not quite clear what she meant, but not greatly caring, either. "Come on, the helicopters are around the north side of the building."

They flew a copter across to Carúpano, and sat down to lunch looking out at the shipping in the open roadstead of the azure sea before the town, while the polite Spanish of Venezuelan voices sounded from the tables around them.

"Why should I laugh at your theory?" she said again, when they were settled, and eating lunch.

"Most people take it to be a crackpot excuse for our failure at the station," he said.

Her brown arched brows rose. "Failure?" she said. "I thought you were making steady progress."

"Yes. And no," he said. "Even before Dr. Knight died, we ran into something he called the environmental barrier."

"Environmental barrier?"

"Yes." Mal poked with his fork at the shrimp in his seafood cocktail. "This work of ours all grew out of the work done by Dr. John Lilly. You read his book, *Man and Dolphin*?"

"No," she said. He looked at her, surprised.

"He was the pioneer in this research with dolphins," Mal said. "I'd have thought reading his book would have been the first thing you would have done before coming down here."

"The first thing I did," she said, "was try to find out something about Corwin Brayt. And I was pretty unsuccessful at that. That's why I landed here with the notion that it was he, not you, who was the real worker with the dolphins."

"That's why you asked me if I knew much about him?"

"That's right," she answered. "But tell me about this environmental barrier."

"There's not a great deal to tell," he said. "Like most big problems, it's simple enough to state. At first, in working with the dolphins, it seemed the early researchers were going great guns, and communication was just around the corner – a matter of interpreting the sounds they made to each other, in the humanly audible range and above it; and teaching the dolphins human speech."

"It turned out those things couldn't be done?"

"They could. They were done – or as nearly so as makes no difference. But then we came up against the fact that communication doesn't mean understanding." He looked at her. "You and I talk the same language, but do we really understand perfectly what the other person means when he speaks to us?"

She looked at him for a moment, and then slowly shook her head without taking her eyes off his face. "Well," said Mal, "that's essentially our problem with the dolphins – only on a much larger scale. Dolphins, like Castor and Pollux, can talk with me, and I with them, but we can't understand each other to any great degree."

"You mean intellectually understood, don't you?" Jane said. "Not just mechanically?"

"That's right," Mal answered. "We agree on denotation of an auditory or other symbol, but not on connotation. I can say to Castor, '*the Gulf Stream is a strong ocean current*,' and he'll agree exactly. But neither of us really has the slightest idea of what the other really means. My mental image of the Gulf Stream is not Castor's image. My notion of 'powerful' is relative to the fact I'm six-feet tall, weigh a hundred and seventy-five pounds, and can lift my own weight against the force of gravity. Castor's is relative to the fact that he is seven feet long, can speed up to forty miles an hour through the water, and as far as he knows weighs nothing, since his four hundred pounds of body-weight are balanced out by the equal weight of the water he displaces. And the concept of lifting something is all but unknown to him. My mental abstraction of 'ocean' is not his, and our ideas of what a current is may coincide, or be literally worlds apart in meaning. And so far we've found no way of bridging the gap between us."

"The dolphins have been trying as well as you?"

"I believe so," said Mal. "But I can't prove it. Any more than I can really prove the dolphin's intelligence to hard-core skeptics until I can come up with something previously outside human knowledge that the dolphins have taught me. Or have them demonstrate that they've learned the use of some human intellectual process. And in these things we've all failed – because, as I believe and Dr. Knight believed, of the connotative gap, which is a result of the environmental barrier."

She sat watching him. He was probably a fool to tell her all this, but he had had no one to talk to like this since Dr. Knight's heart attack, eight months before, and he felt words threatening to pour out of him.

"We've got to learn to think like the dolphins," he said, "or the dolphins have to learn to think like us. For nearly six years now we've been trying and neither side's succeeded." Almost before he thought, he added the one thing he had been determined to keep to himself. "I've been afraid our research funds will be cut off any day now."

"Cut off? By the Willernie Foundation?" she said. "Why would they do that?"

"Because we haven't made any progress for so long," Mal said bitterly. "Or, at least, no provable progress. I'm afraid time's just about run out. And if it runs out, it may never be picked up again. Six years ago, there was a lot of popular interest in the dolphins. Now, they've been discounted and forgotten, shelved as merely bright animals."

"You can't be sure the research won't be picked up again."

"But I feel it," he said. "It's part of my notion about the ability to communicate with an alien race being the test for us humans. I feel we've got this one chance and if we flub it, we'll never have another." He pounded the table softly with his fist. "The worst of it is, I know the dolphins are trying just as hard to get through from their side – if I could only recognize what they're doing, how they're trying to make me understand!"

Jane had been sitting watching him.

"You seem pretty sure of that," she said. "What makes you so sure?"

He unclenched his fist and forced himself to sit back in his chair.

"Have you ever looked into the jaws of a dolphin?" he said. "They're this long." He spread his hands apart in the air to illustrate. "And each pair of jaws contains eighty-eight sharp teeth. Moreover, a dolphin like Castor weighs several hundred pounds and can move at water speeds that are almost incredible to a human. He could crush you easily by ramming you against the side of a tank, if he didn't want to tear you apart with his teeth, or break your bones with blows of his flukes." He looked at her grimly. "In spite of all this, in spite of the fact that men have caught and killed dolphins – even we killed them in our early, fumbling researches, and dolphins are quite capable of using their teeth and strength on marine enemies – no dolphin has ever been known to attack a human being. Aristotle, writing in the fourth century B.C., speaks of the quote gentle and kindly end quote nature of the dolphin."

He stopped, and looked at Jane sharply.

"You don't believe me," he said.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I do." He took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I've made the mistake of mentioning all this before to other people and been sorry I did. I told this to one man who gave me his opinion that it indicated that the dolphin instinctively recognized human superiority and the value of human life." Mal grinned at her, harshly. "But it was just an instinct. *'Like dogs,'* he said. *'Dogs instinctively admire and love people –'* and he wanted to tell me about a dachshund he'd had, named Poochie, who could read the morning newspaper and wouldn't bring it in to him if there was a tragedy reported on the front page. He could prove this, and Poochie's intelligence, by the number of times he'd had to get the paper off the front step himself."

Jane laughed. It was a low, happy laugh; and it took the bitterness suddenly out of Mal.

"Anyway," said Mal, "the dolphin's restraint with humans is just one of the indications, like the wild dolphins coming to us here at the station, that've convinced me the dolphins are trying to understand us, too. And have been, maybe, for centuries."

"I don't see why you worry about the research stopping," she said. "With all you know, can't you convince people –"

"There's only one person I've got to convince," said Mal. "And that's Corwin Brayt. And I don't think I'm doing it. It's just a feeling – but I feel as if he's sitting in judgment upon me, and the work. I feel . . ." Mal hesitated, "almost as if he's a hatchet man."

"He isn't," Jane said. "He can't be. I'll find out for you, if you like. There're ways of doing it. I'd have the answer for you right now, if I'd thought of him as an administrator. But I thought of him as a scientist, and I looked him up in the wrong places."

Mal frowned at her, unbelievably.

"You don't actually mean you can find out that for me?" he asked.

She smiled.

"Wait and see," she replied. "I'd like to know, myself, what his background is."

"It could be important," he said, eagerly. "I know it sounds fantastic – but if I'm right, the research with the dolphins could be important, more important than anything else in the world."

She stood up suddenly from the table.

"I'll go and start checking up right now," she said. "Why don't you go on back to the island? It'll take me a few hours and I'll take the water-taxi over."

"But you haven't finished lunch yet," he said. "In fact you haven't even started lunch. Let's eat first, then you can go."

"I want to call some people and catch them while they're still at work," she said. "It's the time difference on these long-distance calls. I'm sorry. We'll have dinner together, will that do?"

"It'll have to," he said. She melted his disappointment with one of her amazing smiles, and went.

With her gone, Mal found he was not hungry himself. He got hold of the waiter and managed to cancel the main course of their meals. He sat and had two more drinks – not something usual for him. Then he left and flew the copter back to the island.

Pete Adant encountered him as he was on his way from the copter park to the dolphin pool.

"There you are," said Pete. "Corwin wants to see you in an hour – when he gets back, that is. He's gone over to the mainland himself."

Ordinarily, such a piece of news would have awakened the foreboding about cancellation of the research that rode always like a small, cold metal weight inside Mal. But the total of three drinks and no lunch had anesthetized him somewhat. He nodded and went on to the pool.

The dolphins were still there, still at their patterned swimming. Or was he just imagining the pattern? Mal

sat down on his chair by the poolside before the tape recorder which set down a visual pattern of the sounds made by the dolphins. He put the earphones to the hydrophones on, switching on the mike before him.

Suddenly, it struck him how futile all this was. He had gone through these same motions daily for four years now. And what was the sum total of results he had to show for it? Reel on reel of tape recording a failure to hold any truly productive conversation with the dolphins.

He took the earphones off and laid them aside. He lit a cigarette and sat gazing with half-seeing eyes at the underwater ballet of the dolphins. To call it ballet was almost to libel their actions. The gracefulness, the purposefulness of their movements, buoyed up by the salt water, was beyond that of any human in air or on land. He thought again of what he had told Jane Wilson about the dolphin's refusal to attack their human captors, even when the humans hurt or killed them. He thought of the now-established fact that dolphins will come to the rescue of one of their own who has been hurt or knocked unconscious, and hold him up on top of the water so he would not drown – the dolphin's breathing process requiring conscious control, so that it failed if the dolphin became unconscious.

He thought of their playfulness, their affection, the wide and complex range of their speech. In any of those categories, the average human stacked up beside them looked pretty poor. In the dolphin culture there was no visible impulse to war, to murder, to hatred and unkindness. No wonder, thought Mal, they and we have trouble understanding each other. In a different environment, under different conditions, they're the kind of people we've always struggled to be. We have the technology, the tool-using capability, but with it all in many ways we're more animal than they are.

Who's to judge which of us is better, he thought, looking at their movements through the water with the slight hazy melancholy induced by the three drinks on an empty stomach. I might be happier myself, if I were a dolphin. For a second, the idea seemed deeply attractive. The endless open sea, the freedom, an end to all the complex structure of human culture on land. A few lines of poetry came back to him.

"Come Children," he quoted out loud to himself, "let us away! *Down and away, below . . . !*"

He saw the two dolphins pause in their underwater ballet and saw that the microphone before him was on. Their heads turned toward the microphone underwater at the near end of the pool. He remembered the following lines, and he quoted them aloud to the dolphins.

" . . . Now my brothers call from the bay,

"Now the great winds shoreward blow,

"Now the salt tiles seaward flow;

"Now the wild white horses play,

"Chump and chafe and toss in the spray –" *

He broke off suddenly, feeling self-conscious. He looked down at the dolphins. For a moment they merely hung where they were under the surface, facing the microphone. Then Castor turned and

surfaced. His forehead with its blowhole broke out into the air and then his head as he looked up at Mal. His airborne voice from the blowhole's sensitive lips and muscles spoke quacking words at the human.

"Come, Mal," he quacked, *"let us away! Down and away! Below!"*

The head of Pollux surfaced beside Castor's. Mal stared at them for a long second. Then he jerked his gaze back to the tape of the recorder. There on it was the rhythmic record of his own voice as it had sounded in the pool, and below it on their separate tracks, the tapes showed parallel rhythms coming from the dolphins. They had been matching his speech largely in the inaudible range while he was quoting.

Still staring, Mal got to his feet, his mind trembling with a suspicion so great he hesitated to put it into words. Like a man in a daze he walked to the near end of the pool, where three steps led down into the shallower part. Here the water was only three feet deep.

"Come, Mal!" quacked Castor, as the two still hung in the water with their heads out, facing him. *"Let us away! Down and away! Below!"*

Step by step, Mal went down into the pool. He felt the coolness of the water wetting his pants legs, rising to his waist as he stood at last on the pool floor. A few feet in front of him, the two dolphins hung in the water, facing him, waiting. Standing with the water rippling lightly above his belt buckle, Mal looked at them, waiting for some sign, some signal of what they wanted him to do.

They gave him no clue. They only waited. It was up to him to go forward on his own. He sloshed forward into deeper water, put his head down, held his breath, and pushed himself off underwater.

In the forefront of his blurred vision, he saw the grainy concrete floor of the pool. He glided slowly over it, rising a little, and suddenly the two dolphins were all about him – gliding over, above, around his own underwater floating body, brushing lightly against him as they passed, making him a part of their underwater dance. He heard the creaking that was one of the underwater sounds they made and knew that they were probably talking in ranges he could not hear. He could not know what they were saying, he could not sense the meaning of their movements about him, but the feeling that they were trying to convey information to him was inescapable.

He began to feel the need to breathe. He held out as long as he could, then let himself rise to the surface. He broke water and gulped air, and the two dolphin heads popped up nearby, watching him. He dove under the surface again. *I am a dolphin* – he told himself almost desperately – *I am not a man, but a dolphin, and to me all this means – what?*

Several times he dove, and each time the persistent and disciplined movements of the dolphins about him underwater convinced him more strongly that he was on the right track. He came up, blowing, at last. He was not carrying the attempt to be like them far enough, he thought. He turned and swam back to the steps at the shallow end of the pool, and began to climb out.

"Come, Mal – let us away!" quacked a dolphin voice behind him, and he turned to see the heads of both Castor and Pollux out of the water, regarding him with mouths open urgently.

"Come Children – down and away!" he repeated, as reassuringly as he could intonate the words.

He hurried up to the big cabinet of the supply locker at the near end of the pool, and opened the door of the section on skin-diving equipment. He needed to make himself more like a dolphin. He considered the air tanks and the mask of the scuba equipment, and rejected them. The dolphins could not breathe underwater any more than he could. He started jerking things out of the cabinet.

A minute or so later he returned to the steps in swimming trunks, wearing a glass mask with a snorkel tube, and swim fins on his feet. In his hand he carried two lengths of soft rope. He sat down on the steps and with the rope tied his knees and ankles together. Then, clumsily, he hopped and splashed into the water.

Lying face down in the pool, staring at the bottom through his glass faceplate, he tried to move his bound legs together like the flukes of a dolphin, to drive himself slantingly down under the surface.

After a moment or two he managed it. In a moment the dolphins were all about him as he tried to swim underwater, dolphinwise. After a little while his air ran short again and he had to surface. But he came up like a dolphin and lay on the surface filling his lungs, before fanning himself down fluke-fashion with his swim fins. *Think like a dolphin*, he kept repeating to himself over and over. *I am a dolphin. And this is my world. This is the way it is.*

. . . And Castor and Pollux were all about him.

Illustration by RICK BRYANT

The sun was setting in the far distance of the ocean when at last he dragged himself, exhausted, up the steps of the pool and sat down on the poolside. To his water-soaked body, the twilight breeze felt icy. He unbound his legs, took off his fins and mask and walked wearily to the cabinet. From the nearest compartment he took a towel and dried himself, then put on an old bathrobe he kept hanging there. He sat down in an aluminum deck chair beside the cabinet and sighed with weariness.

He looked out at the red sun dipping its lower edge in the sea, and felt a great warm sensation of achievement inside him. In the darkening pool, the two dolphins still swam back and forth. He watched the sun descending . . .

"Mal!" The sound of Corwin Brayt's voice brought his head around. When he saw the tall, cold-faced man was coming toward him with the slim figure of Jane alongside, Mal got up quickly from his chair. They came up to him.

"Why didn't you come in to see me as I asked" Brayt said. "I left word for you with Pete. I didn't even know you were back from the mainland until the water-taxi brought Miss Wilson out just now, and she told me."

"I'm sorry," said Mal. "I think I've run into something here –"

"Never mind telling me now." Brayt's voice was hurried and sharpened with annoyance. "I had a good deal to speak to you about but there's not time now if I'm to catch the mainland plane to St. Louis. I'm sorry to break it this way –" he checked himself and turned to Jane. "Would you excuse us, Miss Wilson? Private business. If you'll give us a second –"

"Of course," she said. She turned and walked away from them alongside the pool, into the deepening twilight. The dolphins paced her in the water. The sun was just down now, and with the sudden oncoming of tropical night, stars could be seen overhead.

"Just let me tell you," said Mal. "It's about the research."

"I'm sorry," said Brayt. "There's no point in your telling me now. I'll be gone a week and I want you to watch out for this Jane Wilson, here." He lowered his voice slightly. "I talked to *Background Monthly* on the phone this afternoon, and the editor I spoke to there didn't know about the article, or recognize her name –"

"Somebody new," said Mal. "Probably someone who didn't know her."

"At any rate it makes no difference," said Brayt. "As I say, I'm sorry to tell you in such a rushed fashion, but Willernie has decided to end its grant of funds to the station. I'm flying to St. Louis to settle details." He hesitated. "I'm sure you knew something like this was coming, Mal."

Mal stared, shocked.

"It was inevitable," said Brayt coldly. "You knew that." He paused. "I'm sorry."

"But the station'll fold without the Willernie support!" said Mal, finding his voice. "You know that. And just today I found out what the answer is! Just this afternoon! Listen to me!" He caught Brayt's arm as the other started to turn away. "The dolphins have been trying to contact us. Oh, not at first, not when we experimented with captured specimens. But since we opened the pool to the sea. The only trouble was we insisted on trying to communicate by sound alone – and that's all but impossible for them."

"Excuse me," said Brayt, trying to disengage his arm.

"Listen, will you!" said Mal, desperately. "Their communication process is an incredibly rich one. It's as if you and I communicated by using all the instruments in a symphony orchestra. They not only use sound from four to a hundred and fifty kilocycles per second, they use movement, and touch – and all of it in reference to the ocean conditions surrounding them at the moment."

"I've got to go."

"Just a minute. Don't you remember what Lilly hypothesized about the dolphin's methods of navigation? He suggested that it was a multivariable method, using temperature, speed, taste of the water, position of the stars, sun, and so forth, all fed into their brains simultaneously and instantaneously. Obviously, it's true, and obviously their process of communication is also a multivariable method utilizing sound, touch, position, place, and movement. Now that we know this, we can go into the sea with them and try to operate across their whole spectrum of communication. No wonder we weren't able to get across anything but the most primitive exchanges, restricting ourselves to sound. It's been equivalent to restricting human communication to just the nouns in each sentence, while maintaining the sentence structure –"

"I'm very sorry!" said Brayt, firmly. "I tell you, Mal. None of this makes any difference. The decision of the Foundation is based on financial reasons. They've got just so much money available to donate, and this station's allotment has already gone in other directions. There's nothing that can be done, now."

He pulled his arm free.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "I'll be back in a week at the outside. You might be thinking of how to wind up things, here."

He turned with that, and went away, around the building toward the parking spot of the station copters. Mal, stunned, watched the tall, slim, broad-shouldered figure move into darkness.

"It doesn't matter," said the gentle voice of Jane comfortingly at his ear. He jerked about and saw her facing him. "You won't need the Willernie funds any more."

"He told you?" Mal stared at her as she shook her head, smiling in the growing dimness. "You heard? From way over there?"

"Yes," she said. "And you were right about Brayt. I got your answer for you. He was a hatchet man – sent here by the Willernie people to decide whether the station deserved further funds."

"But we've got to have them!" Mal said. "It won't take much more, but we've got to go into the sea and work out ways to talk to the dolphins in their own mode. We've got to expand to their level of communication, not try to compress them to ours. You see, this afternoon, I had a breakthrough –"

"I know," she said. "I know all about it."

"You know?" He stared at her. "How do you know?"

"You've been under observation all afternoon," she said. "You're right. You did break through the environmental barrier. From now on it's just a matter of working out methods."

"Under observation? How?" Abruptly, that seemed the least important thing at hand. "But I have to have money," he said. "It'll take time and equipment, and that costs money –"

"No." Her voice was infinitely gentle. "You won't need to work out your own methods. Your work is done, Mal. This afternoon the dolphins and you broke the bars to communication between the two races for the first time in the history of either. It was the job you set out to do and you were part of it. You can be happy knowing that."

"Happy?" He almost shouted at her, suddenly. "I don't understand what you're talking about."

"I'm sorry." There was a ghost of a sigh from her. "We'll show you how to talk to the dolphins, Mal, if men need to. As well as some other things – perhaps." Her face lifted to him under the star-marked sky, still a little light in the west. "You see, you were right about something more than dolphins, Mal. Your idea that the ability to communicate with another intelligent race, an alien race, was a test that had to be passed before the superior species of a planet could be contacted by the intelligent races of the galaxy – that was right, too."

He stared at her. She was so close to him, he could feel the living warmth of her body, although they were not touching. He saw her, he felt her, standing before him; and he felt all the strange deep upwelling of emotion that she had released in him the moment he first saw her. The deep emotion he felt for her still. Suddenly understanding came to him.

"You mean you're not from Earth –" His voice was hoarse and uncertain. It wavered to a stop. "But you're human!" he cried desperately.

She looked back at him a moment before answering. In the dimness he could not tell for sure, but he thought he saw the glint of tears in her eyes.

"Yes," she said, at last, slowly. "In the way you mean that – you can say I'm human."

A great and almost terrible joy burst suddenly in him. It was the joy of a man who, in the moment when he thinks he has lost everything, finds something of infinitely greater value.

"But how?" he said, excitedly, a little breathlessly. He pointed up at the stars. "If you come from some place – up there? How can you be human?"

She looked down, away from his face. "I'm sorry," she said. "I can't tell you."

"Can't tell me? Oh," he said with a little laugh, "you mean I wouldn't understand."

"No –" Her voice was almost inaudible, "I mean I'm not allowed to tell you."

"Not allowed –" He felt an unreasoning chill about his heart. "But Jane –" He broke off fumbling for words. "I don't know quite how to say this, but it's important to me to know. From the first moment I saw you there, I . . . I mean, maybe you don't feel anything like this, you don't know what I'm talking about –"

"Yes," she whispered. "I do."

"Then—" He stared at her. "You could at least say something that would set my mind at rest. I mean . . . it's only a matter of time now. We're going to be getting together, your people and I, aren't we?"

She looked up at him out of darkness.

"No," She said, "we aren't, Mal. Ever. And that's why I can't tell you anything."

"We aren't?" he cried. "We aren't? But you came and saw us communicate— Why aren't we?"

She looked up at him for the last time, then, and told him. He, having heard what she had to say, stood still; still as a stone, for there was nothing left to do. And she, turning slowly and finally away from him, went off to the edge of the pool and down the steps into the shallow water, where the dolphins came rushing to meet her, their foamy tearing of the surface making a wake as white as snow.

Then the three of them moved, as if by magic, across the surface of the pool and out the entrance of it to the ocean. And so they continued to move off until they were lost to sight in darkness and the starlit, glinting surface of the waves.

It came to Mal then, as he stood there, that the dolphins must have been waiting for her all this time. All the wild dolphins, who had come to the station after the first two captives, were set free to leave or stay as they wanted. The dolphins had known, perhaps for centuries, that it was to them alone on Earth that the long-awaited visitors from the stars would finally come.

*["The Forsaken Merman," by Matthew Arnold, 1849.]

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This is one of Gordy's most-requested stories, featuring one of his most engaging and enduring characters, Cully When (see *None But Man and others*). *You could file it under Pure Fun – but it does serve to remind us that the distinction between a pirate and a privateer is more than letters of marque. It is essentially motivation, not the verdict of history, that decides who is a Hero and*

who a . . .

HILIFTER

It was locked – from the outside.

Not only that, but the mechanical latch handle that would override the button lock on the tiny tourist cabin aboard the *Star of the North* was hidden by the very bed on which Cully When sat cross-legged, like some sinewy mountain man out of Cully's own pioneering ancestry. Cully grinned at the image in the mirror which went with the washstand now hidden by the bed beneath him. He would not have risked such an expression as that grin if there had been anyone around to see him. The grin, he knew, gave too much of him away to viewers. It was the hard, unconquerable humor of a man dealing for high stakes.

Here, in the privacy of this locked cabin, it was also a tribute to the skill of the steward who had imprisoned him. A dour and cautious individual with a long Scottish face, and no doubt the greater part of his back wages reinvested in the very spaceship line he worked for. Or had Cully done something to give himself away? No. Cully shook his head. If that had been the case, the steward would have done more than just lock the cabin. It occurred to Cully that his face, at last, might be becoming known.

"I'm sorry, sir," the steward had said, as he opened the cabin's sliding door and saw the unmade bed. "Off-watch steward's missed making it up." He clucked reprovingly. "I'll fix it for you, sir."

"No hurry," said Cully. "I just want to hang my clothes; and I can do that later."

"Oh, no, sir," The lean, dour face of the other – as primitive in a different way as Cully's own – looked shocked. "Regulations. Passengers' gear to be stowed and bunk made up before overdrive."

"Well, I can't just stand here in the corridor," said Cully. "I want to get rid of the stuff and get a drink." And indeed the corridor was so narrow, they were like two vehicles on a mountain road. One would have to back up to some wider spot to let the other past.

"Have the sheets in a moment, sir," said the steward. "Just a moment, sir. If you wouldn't mind sitting up on the bed, sir?"

"All right," said Cully. "But hurry. I want to step up for a drink in the lounge."

He hopped up on to the bed, which filled the little cabin in its down position; and drew his legs up tailor-fashion to clear them out of the corridor.

"Excuse me, sir," said the steward, closed the door, and went off. As soon as he heard the button lock latch, Cully had realized what the man was up to. But an unsuspecting man would have waited at least several minutes before hammering on the locked door and calling for someone to let him out. Cully had been forced to sit digesting the matter in silence.

At the thought of it now, however, he grinned again. That steward was a regular prize package. Cully must remember to think up something appropriate for him, afterward. At the moment, there were more pressing things to think of.

Cully looked in the mirror again and was relieved at the sight of himself without the betraying grin. The face that looked back at him at the moment was lean and angular. A little peroxide solution on his thick, straight brows had taken the sharp appearance off his high cheekbones and given his pale blue eyes a faintly innocent expression. When he really wanted to fail to impress sharply discerning eyes, he also made it a point to chew gum.

The present situation, he considered now, did not call for that extra touch. If the steward was already even vaguely suspicious of him, he could not wait around for an ideal opportunity. He would have to get busy now, while they were still working the spaceship out of the solar system to a safe distance where the overdrive could be engaged without risking a mass-proximity explosion.

And this, since he was imprisoned so neatly in own shoebox of a cabin, promised to be a problem right from the start.

He looked around the cabin. Unlike the salon cabins on the level overhead, where it was possible to pull down the bed and still have a tiny space to stand upright in – either beside the bed, in the case of single-bed cabins, or between them, in the case of doubles – in the tourist cabins once the bed was down, the room was completely divided into two spaces – the space above the bed and the space below. In the space above, with him, were the light and temperature and ventilation controls, controls to provide him with soft music or the latest adventure tape, food and drink dispensers and a host of other minor comforts.

There were also a phone and a signal button, both connected with the steward's office. Thoughtfully he tried both. There was, of course, no answer.

At that moment a red light flashed on the wall opposite him; and a voice came out of the grille that usually provided the soft music.

"We are about to maneuver. This is the Captain's Section, speaking. We are about to maneuver. Will all lounge passengers return to their cabins? Will all passengers remain in their cabins, and fasten seat belts. We are about to maneuver. This is the Captain's Section –"

Cully stopped listening. The steward would have known this announcement was coming. It meant that everybody but crew members would be in their cabins, and crew members would be up top in control level at maneuver posts. And that meant nobody was likely to happen along to let Cully out. If Cully could get out of this cabin, however, those abandoned corridors could be a break for him.

However, as he looked about him now, Cully was rapidly revising downward his first cheerful assumption that he – who had gotten out of so many much more intentional prisons – would find this a relatively easy task. On the same principle that a pit with unclimbable walls and too deep to jump up from and catch an edge is one of the most perfect traps designable – the tourist room held Cully. He was on top of the bed; and he needed to be below it to operate the latch handle.

First question: How impenetrable was the bed itself? Cully dug down through the covers, pried up the mattress, peered through the springs, and saw a blank panel of metal. Well, he had not really expected much in that direction. He put the mattress and covers back and examined what he had to work with above-bed.

There were all the control switches and buttons on the wall, but nothing among them promised him any aid. The walls were the same metal paneling as the base of the bed. Cully began to turn out his pockets in the hope of finding something in them that would inspire him. And he did indeed turn out a number of interesting items, including a folded piece of notepaper which he looked at rather soberly before laying it aside, with a boy scout type of knife that just happened to have a set of lock picks among its other tools. The note would only take up valuable time at the moment, and – the lock being out of reach in the door – the lock picks were no good either.

There was nothing in what he produced to inspire him, however. Whistling a little mournfully, he began to make the next best use of his pile of property. He unscrewed the nib and cap of his long, gold fountain pen, took out the ink cartridge, and laid the tube remaining aside. He removed his belt, and the buckle from the belt. The buckle, it appeared, clipped on to the fountain pen tube in somewhat the manner of a pistol grip. He reached in his mouth, removed a bridge covering from the second premolar to the second molar, and combined this with a small metal throwaway dispenser of the sort designed to contain antacid tablets. The two together had a remarkable resemblance to the magazine and miniaturized trigger assembly of a small handgun; and when he attached them to the buckle-fountain-pen-tube combination the resemblance became so marked as to be practically inarguable.

Cully made a few adjustments in this and looked around himself again. For the second time, his eye came to rest on the folded note, and, frowning at himself in the mirror, he did pick it up and unfold it. Inside it read: "O was the pow'r the Giftie gie us" Love, Lucy. Well, thought Cully, that was about what you could expect from a starry-eyed girl with Scottish ancestors, and romantic notions about present-day conditions on Alderbaran IV and the other new worlds.

". . . But if you have all that land on Asterope IV, why aren't you back there developing it?" she had asked him.

"The New Worlds are stiffing to death," he had answered. But he saw then she did not believe him. To her, the New Worlds were still the romantic Frontier, as the Old Worlds Confederation newspapers capitalized it. She thought he had given up from lack of vision.

"You should try again . . ." she murmured. He gave up trying to make her understand. And then, when the cruise was over and their shipboard acquaintance – that was all it was, really – ended on the Miami dock, he had felt her slip something in his pocket so lightly only someone as self-trained as he would have noticed it. Later he had found it to be this note – which he had kept now for too long.

He started to throw it away, changed his mind for the sixtieth time and put it back in his pocket. He turned back to the problem of getting out of the cabin. He looked it over, pulled a sheet from the bed, and used its length to measure a few distances.

The bunk was pivoted near the point where the head of it entered the recess in the wall that concealed it

in Up position. Up, the bunk was designed to fit with its foot next to the ceiling. Consequently, coming up, the foot would describe an arc –

About a second and a half later he had discovered that the arc of the foot, ascending, would leave just enough space in the opposite top angle between wall and ceiling so that if he could just manage to hang there, while releasing the safety latch at the foot of the bed, he might be able to get the bed up past him into the wall recess.

It was something which required the muscle and skill normally called for by so-called "chimney ascents" in mountain climbing – where the climber wedges himself between two opposing walls of rock. A rather wide chimney – since the room was a little more than four feet in width. But Cully had had some little experience in that line.

He tried it. A few seconds later, pressed against walls and ceiling, he reached down, managed to get the bed released, and had the satisfaction of seeing it fold up by him. Half a breath later he was free, out in the corridor of the Tourist Section.

The corridor was deserted and silent. All doors were closed. Cully closed his own thoughtfully behind him and went along the corridor to the more open space in the center of the ship. He looked up a steel ladder to the entrance of the Salon Section, where there would be another ladder to the Crew Section, and from there eventually to his objective – the Control level and the Captain's Section. Had the way up those ladders been open, it would have been simple. But level with the top of the ladder he saw the way to the Salon Section was closed off by a metal cover capable of withstanding fifteen pounds per square inch of pressure.

It had been closed, of course, as the other covers would have been, at the beginning of the maneuver period.

Cully considered it thoughtfully, his fingers caressing the pistol grip of the little handgun he had just put together. He would have preferred, naturally, that the covers be open and the way available to him without the need for fuss or muss. But the steward had effectively ruled out that possibility by reacting as and when he had. Cully turned away from the staircase and frowned, picturing the layout of the ship, as he had committed it to memory five days ago.

There was an emergency hatch leading through the ceiling of the end tourist cabin to the end salon cabin overhead, at both extremes of the corridor. He turned and went down to the end cabin nearest him, and laid his finger quietly on the outside latch handle.

There was no sound from inside. He drew his put-together handgun from his belt and, holding it in his left hand, calmly and without hesitation, opened the door and stepped inside.

He stopped abruptly. The bed in here was, of course, up in the wall, or he could never have entered. But the cabin's single occupant was asleep on the right-hand seat of the two seats that an upraised bed left exposed. The occupant was a small girl of about eight years old.

The slim golden barrel of the handgun had swung immediately to aim at the child's temple. For an automatic second, it hung poised there, Cully's finger half-pressing the trigger. But the little girl never stirred. In the silence, Cully heard the surge of his own blood in his ears and the faint crackle of the note in his shirt pocket. He lowered the gun and fumbled in the waistband of his pants, coming up with a child-sized anesthetic pellet. He slipped this into his gun above the regular load, aimed the gun, and fired. The child made a little uneasy movement all at once and then lay still. Cully bent over her for a second,

and heard the soft sound of her breathing. He straightened up. The pellet worked not through the blood stream, but immediately through a reaction of the nerves. In fifteen minutes the effect would be worn off, and the girl's sleep would be natural slumber again.

He turned away, stepped up on the opposite seat, and laid his free hand on the latch handle of the emergency hatch overhead. A murmur of voices from above made him hesitate. He unscrewed the barrel of the handgun and put it in his ear with the other hollow end resting against the ceiling which was also the floor overhead. The voices came, faint and distorted, but understandable to his listening.

"... hilifter," a female voice was saying.

"Oh, Patty!" another female voice answered. "He was just trying to scare you. You believe everything."

"How about that ship that got hilifted just six months ago? That ship going to one of the Pleiades, just like this one? *The Queen of Argyle* –"

"*Princess of Argyle*."

"Well, you know what I mean. Ships do get hilifted. Just as long as there're governments on the pioneer worlds that'll license them and no questions asked. And it could just as well happen to this ship. But you don't worry about it a bit."

"No, I don't."

"When hilifters take over a ship, they kill off everyone who can testify against them. None of the passengers or ship's officers from the *Princess of Argyle* was ever heard of again."

"Says who?"

"Oh, everybody knows that!"

Cully took the barrel from his ear and screwed it back onto his weapon. He glanced at the anesthetized child and thought of trying the other cabin with an emergency hatch. But the maneuver period would not last more than twenty minutes at the most and five of that must be gone already. He put the handgun between his teeth, jerked the latch to the overhead hatch, and pulled it down and open.

He put both hands on the edge of the hatch opening and with one spring went upward into the salon cabin overhead.

He erupted into the open space between a pair of facing seats, each of which held a girl in her twenties. The one on his left was a rather plump, short, blond girl who was sitting curled up on her particular seat with a towel across her knees, an open bottle of pink nail polish on the towel, and the brush-cap to the bottle poised in her hand. The other was a tall, dark-haired, very pretty lass with a lap-desk pulled down from the wall and a hand-scriber on the desk where she was apparently writing a letter. For a moment both stared at him, and his gun; and then the blonde, gave a muffled shriek, pulled the towel over her head, and lay still, while the brunette, staring at Cully, went slowly pale.

"Jim!" she said.

"Sorry," said Cully. "The real name's Cully When. Sorry about this, too, Lucy." He held the gun casually, but it was pointed in her general direction. "I didn't have any choice."

A little of the color came back. Her eyes were as still as fragments of green bottle glass.

"No choice about what?" she said.

"To come through this way," said Cully. "Believe me, if I'd known you were here, I'd have picked any other way. But there wasn't any other way; and I didn't know."

"I see," she said, and looked at the gun in his hand. "Do you have to point that at me?"

"I'm afraid," said Cully, gently, "I do."

She did not smile.

"I'd still like to know what you're doing here," she said.

"I'm just passing through," said Cully. He gestured with the gun to the emergency hatch to the Crew Section, overhead. "As I say, I'm sorry it has to be through your cabin. But I didn't even know you were serious about emigrating."

"People usually judge other people by themselves," she said expressionlessly. "As it happened, I believed you." She looked at the gun again. "How many of you are there on board?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that," said Cully.

"No. You couldn't, could you?" Her eyes held steady on him. "You know, there's an old poem about a man like you. He rides by a farm maiden and she falls in love with him, just like that. But he makes her guess what he is; and she guesses . . . oh, all sorts of honorable things, like soldier, or forester. But he tells her in the end he's just an outlaw, slinking through the wood." Cully winced.

"Lucy—" he said. "Lucy—"

"Oh, that's all right," she said. "I should have known when you didn't call me or get in touch with me, after the boat docked." She glanced over at her friend, motionless under the towel. "You have the gun. What do you want us to do?"

"Just sit still," he said. "I'll go on up through here and be out of your way in a second. I'm afraid—" He reached over to the phone on the wall and pulled its cord loose. "You can buzz for the steward, still, after I'm gone," he said. "But he won't answer just a buzzer until after the maneuver period's over. And the stairway hatches are locked. Just sit tight and you'll be all right."

He tossed the phone aside and tucked the gun in the waistband.

"Excuse me," he said, stepping up on the seat beside her. She moved stiffly away from him. He unlatched the hatch overhead, pulled it down, and went up through it. When he glanced back down through it, he saw her face stiffly upturned to him.

He turned away and found himself in an equipment room. It was what he had expected from the ship's plans he had memorized before coming aboard. He went quickly out of the room and scouted the section.

As he had expected, there was no one at all upon this level. Weight and space on interstellar liners being at the premium that they were, even a steward like the one who had locked him in his cabin did double duty. In overdrive, no one but the navigating officer had to do much of anything. But in ordinary operation, there were posts for all ship's personnel, and all ship's personnel were at them up in the Captain's Section at Control.

The stair hatch to this top and final section of the ship he found to be closed as the rest. This, of course, was routine. He had not expected this to be unlocked, though a few years back ships like this might have been that careless. There were emergency hatches from this level as well, of course, up to the final section. But it was no part of Cully's plan to come up in the middle of a Control Room or a Captain's Section filled with young, active, and almost certainly armed officers. The inside route was closed.

The outside route remained a possibility. Cully went down to the opposite end of the corridor and found the entry port closed, but sealed only by a standard lock. In an adjoining room there were outside suits. Cully spent a few minutes with his picks, breaking the lock of the seal; and then went in to put on the suit that came closest to fitting his six-foot-two frame.

A minute later he stepped out onto the outside skin of the ship.

As he watched the outer door of the entry port closing ponderously in the silence of airless space behind him, he felt the usual inner coldness that came over him at times like this. He had a mild but very definite phobia about open space with its myriads of unchanging stars. He knew what caused it – several psychiatrists had told him it was nothing to worry about, but he could not quite accept their unconcern. He knew he was a very lonely individual, underneath it all; and subconsciously he guessed he equated space with the final extinction in which he expected one day to disappear and be forgotten forever. He could not really believe it was possible for someone like him to make a dent in such a universe.

It was symptomatic, he thought now, plodding along with the magnetic bootsoles of his suit clinging to the metal hull, that he had never had any success with women – like Lucy. A sort of bad luck seemed to put him always in the wrong position with anyone he stood a chance of loving. Inwardly, he was just as starry-eyed as Lucy, he admitted to himself, alone with the vastness of space and the stars, but he'd never had much success bringing it out into the open. Where she went all right, he seemed to go all wrong. Well, he thought, that was life. She went her way and he would go his. And it was probably a good thing.

He looked ahead up the side of the ship, and saw the slight bulge of the observation window of the Navigator's Section. It was just a few more steps now.

Modern ships were sound insulated, thankfully, or the crew inside would have heard his dragging footsteps on the hull. He reached the window and peered in. The room he looked into was empty.

Beside the window was a small emergency port for cleaning and repairs of the window. Clumsily, and with a good deal of effort, he got the lock-bolt holding it down unscrewed, and let himself in. The space

between outer and inner ports here was just enough to contain a space-suited man. He crouched in darkness after the outer port had closed behind him.

Incoming air screamed up to audibility. He cautiously cracked the interior door and looked into a room still empty of any crew members. He slipped inside and snapped the lock on the door before getting out of his suit.

As soon as he was out, he drew the handgun from his belt and cautiously opened the door he had previously locked. He looked out on a short corridor leading one way to the Control Room, and the other, if his memory of the ship plans had not failed him, to the central room above the stairway hatch from below. Opening off this small circular space surrounding the hatch would be another entrance directly to the Control Room, a door to the Captain's Quarters, and one to the Communications Room.

The corridor was deserted. He heard voices coming down it from the Control Room; and he slipped out the door that led instead to the space surrounding the stairway hatch. And checked abruptly.

The hatch was open. And it had not been open when he had checked it from the level below, ten minutes before.

For the first time he cocked an ear specifically to the kinds of voices coming from the Control Room. The acoustics of this part of the ship mangled all sense out of the words being said. But now that he listened, he had no trouble recognizing, among others, the voice of Lucy.

It occurred to him then with a kind of wonder at himself, that it would have been no feat for an active girl like herself to have followed him up through the open emergency hatch, and later mount the crew level stairs to the closed hatch there and pound on it until someone opened up.

He threw aside further caution and sprinted across to the doorway of the Captain's Quarters. The door was unlocked. He ducked inside and looked around him. It was empty. It occurred to him that Lucy and the rest of the ship's complement would probably still be expecting him to be below in the Crew's Section. He closed the door and looked about him, at the room he was in.

The room was more lounge than anything else, being the place where the captain of a spaceship did his entertaining. But there was a large and businesslike desk in one corner of the room, and in the wall opposite was a locked, glassed-in case holding an assortment of rifles and handguns.

He was across the room in a moment, and in a few savage seconds had the lock to the case picked open. He reached in and took down a short-barreled, flaring-muzzled riot gun. He checked the chamber. It was filled with a full thousand-clip of the deadly steel darts. Holding this in one hand and his handgun in the other, he went back out the door and toward the other entrance to the Control Room – the entrance from the central room around the stairway hatch.

". . . He wouldn't tell me if there were any others," Lucy was saying to a man in a captain's shoulder tabs, while eight other men, including the dour-faced steward who had locked Cully in his cabin, stood at their posts, but listening.

"There aren't any," said Cully, harshly. They all turned to him. He laid the handgun aside on a control

table by the entrance to free his other hand, and lifted the heavy riot gun in both hands, covering them. "There's only me."

"What do you want?" said the man with the captain's tabs. His face was set, and a little pale. Cully ignored the question. He came into the room, circling to his right, so as to have a wall at his back.

"You're one man short," said Cully as he moved. "Where is he?"

"Off-shift steward's sleeping," said the steward who had locked Cully in his room.

"Move back," said Cully, picking up crew members from their stations at control boards around the room, and herding them before him back around the room's circular limit to the very entrance by which he had come in. "I don't believe you."

"Then I might as well tell you," said the captain, backing up now along with Lucy and the rest. "He's in Communications. We keep a steady contact with Solar Police right up until we go into overdrive. There are two of their ships pacing alongside us right now, lights off, a hundred miles each side of us."

"Tell me another," said Cully. "I don't believe that either." He was watching everybody in the room, but what he was most aware of were the eyes of Lucy, wide upon him. He spoke to her, harshly. "Why did you get into this?"

She was pale to the lips; and her eyes had a stunned look.

"I looked down and saw what you'd done to that child in the cabin below –" Her voice broke off into a whisper. "Oh, Cully –"

He laughed mournfully.

"Stop there," he ordered. He had driven them back into a corner near the entrance he had come in. "I've got to have all of you together. Now, one of you is going to tell me where that other man is – and I'm going to pick you off, one at a time, until somebody does."

"You're a fool," said the captain. A little of his color had come back. "You're all alone. You don't have a chance of controlling this ship by yourself. You know what happens to hiliifters, don't you? It's not just a prison sentence. Give up now and we'll all put in a word for you. You might get off without mandatory execution."

"No thanks," said Cully. He gestured with the end of the riot gun. "We're going into overdrive. Start setting up the course as I give it to you."

"No," said the captain, looking hard at him.

"You're a brave man," said Cully. "But I'd like to point out something. I'm going to shoot you if you won't cooperate and then I'm going to work down the line of your officers. Sooner or later somebody's going to preserve his life by doing what I tell you. So getting yourself killed isn't going to save the ship at all. It just means somebody with less courage than you lives. And you die."

Illustration by RICK BRYANT

There was a sharp, bitter intake of breath from the direction of Lucy. Cully kept his eyes on the captain.

"How about it?" Cully asked.

"No brush-pants of a Colonial," said the captain, slowly and deliberately, "is going to stand in my Control Room and tell me where to take my ship."

"Did the captain and officers of the *Princess of Argyle* ever come back?" said Cully, somewhat cryptically.

"It's nothing to me whether they came or stayed."

"I take it all back," said Cully. "You're too valuable to lose." The riot gun shifted to come to bear on the First Officer, a tall, thin, younger man whose hair was already receding at the temples. "But you aren't, friend. I'm not even going to tell you what I'm going to do. I'm just going to start counting; and when I decide to stop you've had it. One . . . two . . ."

"Don't! Don't shoot!" The First Officer jumped across the few steps that separated him from the Main Computer Panel. "What's your course? What do you want me to set up –"

The captain began to curse the First Officer. He spoke slowly and distinctly and in a manner that completely ignored the presence of Lucy in the Control Room. He went right on as Cully gave the First Officer the course and the First Officer set it up. He stopped only as – abruptly – the lights went out, and the ship overdrove.

When the lights came on again – it was a matter of only a fraction of a second of real time – the captain was at last silent. He seemed to have sagged in the brief interval of darkness and his face looked older.

And then, slamming through the tense silence of the room came the sound of the Contact Alarm Bell.

"Turn it on," said Cully. The First Officer stepped over and pushed a button below the room's communication screen. It cleared suddenly to show a man in a white jacket.

"We're alongside, Cully," he said. "We'll take over now. How're you fixed for casualties?"

"At the moment –" began Cully. But he got no further than that. Behind him, three hard, spaced words in a man's voice cut him off.

"Drop it, Hilifter!"

Cully did not move. He cocked his eyebrows a little sadly and grinned his untamable grin for the first time at the ship's officers, and Lucy and the figure in the screen. Then the grin went away.

"Friend," he said to the man hidden behind him, "your business is running a spaceship. Mine is taking them away from people who run them. Right now you're figuring how you make me give up or shoot me down and this ship dodges back into overdrive, and you become hero for saving it. But it isn't going to work that way."

He waited for a moment to hear if the off-watch steward behind him – or whoever the officer was – would answer. But there was only silence.

"You're behind me," said Cully. "But I can turn pretty fast. You may get me coming around, but unless you've got something like a small cannon, you're not going to stop me getting you at this short range, whether you've got me or not. Now, if you think I'm just talking, you better think again. For me, this is one of the risks of the trade."

He turned. As he did so he went for the floor and heard the first shot go by his ear. As he hit the floor another shot hit the deck beside him and ricocheted into his side. But by that time he had the heavy riot gun aimed and he pressed the firing button. The stream of darts knocked the man backward out of the entrance to the Control Room to lie, a still and huddled shape, in the corridor outside.

Cully got to his feet, feeling the single dart in his side. The room was beginning to waver around him, but he felt that he could hold on for the necessary couple of minutes before the people from the ship moving in alongside could breach the lock and come aboard. His jacket was loose and would hide the bleeding underneath. None of those facing him could know he had been hit.

"All right, folks," he said, managing a grin. "It's all over but the shouting –" And then Lucy broke suddenly from the group and went running across the room toward the entrance through which Cully had come a moment or so earlier.

"Lucy –" he barked at her. And then he saw her stop and turn by the control table near the entrance, snatching up the little handgun he had left there. "Lucy, do you want to get shot?"

But she was bringing up the little handgun, held in the grip of both her hands, and aiming it squarely at him. The tears were running down her face.

"It's better for you, Cully –" she was sobbing. "Better . . ."

He swung the riot gun to bear on her, but he saw she did not even see it.

"Lucy, I'll have to kill you!" he cried. But she no more heard him, apparently, than she saw the muzzle-on view of the riot gun in his hands. The wavering golden barrel in her grasp wobbled to bear on him.

"Oh, Cully!" she wept. "Cully –" And pulled the trigger.

"Oh, *hell!*" said Cully in despair. And let her shoot him down.

When he came back, things were very fuzzy there at first. He heard the voice of the man in the white jacket, arguing with the voice of Lucy.

"Hallucination –" muttered Cully. The voices broke off.

"Oh, he said something!" cried the voice of Lucy.

"Cully?" said the man's voice. Cully felt a two-finger grip on his wrist in the area where his pulse should be – if, that was, he had a pulse. "How're you feeling?"

"Ship's doctor?" muttered Cully, with great effort. "You got the *Star of the North*?"

"That's right. All under control. How do you feel?"

"Feel fine," mumbled Cully. The doctor laughed.

"Sure you do," said the doctor. "Nothing like being shot a couple of times and having a pellet and a dart removed to put a man in good shape."

"Not Lucy's fault –" muttered Cully. "Not understand." He made another great effort in the interests of explanation. "Stars'n eyes."

"Oh, what does he mean?" wept Lucy.

"He means," said the voice of the doctor harshly, "that you're just the sort of fine young idealist who makes the best sort of sucker for the sort of propaganda the Old Worlds Confederation dishes out."

"Oh, you'd say that!" flared Lucy's voice. "Of course, you'd say that!"

"Young lady," said the doctor, "how rich do you think our friend Cully, here, is?"

Cully heard her blow her nose, weakly.

"He's got millions, I suppose," she said, bitterly. "Hasn't he hilifted dozens of ships?"

"He's hilifted eight," said the doctor, dryly, "which, incidentally, puts him three ships ahead of any other contender for the title of hilifting champion around the populated stars. The mortality rate among single workers – and you can't get any more than a single 'lifter aboard Confederation ships nowadays – hits ninety per cent with the third ship captured. But I doubt Cully's been able to save millions on a salary of six hundred a month, and a bonus of one tenth of one per cent of salvage value, at Colonial World rates."

There was a moment of profound silence.

"What do you mean?" said Lucy, in a voice that wavered a little.

"I'm trying," said the doctor, "for the sake of my patient – and perhaps for your own – to push aside what Cully calls those stars in your eyes and let a crack of surface daylight through."

"But why would he work for a salary – like that?" Disbelief was strong in her voice.

"Possibly," said the doctor, "just possibly because the picture of a bloodstained hilifter with a knife between his teeth, carousing in Colonial bars, shooting down Confederation officers for the fun of it, and dragging women passengers off by the hair, has very little to do with the real facts of a man like Cully."

"Smart girl," managed Cully. "S'little mixed up, s'all –" He managed to get his vision cleared a bit. The other two were standing facing each other, right beside his bed. The doctor had a slight flush above his cheekbones and looked angry. Lucy, Cully noted anxiously, was looking decidedly pale. "Mixed up –" Cully said again.

"Mixed up isn't the word for it," said the doctor angrily, without looking down at him. "She and all ninety-nine out of a hundred people on the Old Worlds." He went on to Lucy. "You met Cully Earthside. Evidently you liked him there. He didn't strike you as the scum of the stars, then.

"But all you have to do is hear him tagged with the name 'hilifter' and immediately your attitude changes."

Lucy swallowed.

"No," she said, in a small voice, "it didn't . . . change."

"Then who do you think's wrong – you or Cully?" The doctor snorted. "If I have to give you reasons, what's the use? If you can't see things straight for yourself, who can help you? That's what's wrong with all the people back on the Old Worlds."

"I believe Cully," she said. "I just don't know why I should."

"Who has lots of raw materials – the raw materials to support trade – but hasn't any trade?" asked the doctor. She frowned at him.

"Why . . . the New Worlds haven't any trade on their own," she said. "But they're too undeveloped yet, too young –"

"Young? There's three to five generations on most of them!"

"I mean they haven't got the industry, the commercial organization –" She faltered before the slightly satirical expression on the doctor's face. "All right, then; you tell me! If they've got everything they need for trade, why don't they? The Old Worlds did; why don't you?"

"In what?"

She stared at him.

"But the Confederation of the Old Worlds already has the ships for interworld trade. And they're glad to ship Colonial products. In fact they do," she said.

"So a load of miniaturized surgical power instruments made on Asterope in the Pleiades has to be shipped to Earth and then shipped clear back out to its destination on Electra, also in the Pleiades. Only by the time they get there they've doubled or tripled in price, and the difference is in the pockets of Earth shippers." She was silent.

"It seems to me," said the doctor, "that girl who was with you mentioned something about your coming from Boston, back in the United States on Earth. Didn't they have a tea party there once? Followed by a revolution? And didn't it all have something to do with the fact that England at that time would not allow its colonies to own and operate their own ships for trade – so that it all had to be funneled through England in English ships to the advantage of English merchants?"

"But why can't you build your own ships?" she said. Cully felt it was time he got in on the conversation. He cleared his throat, weakly.

"Hey –" he managed to say. They both looked at him; but he himself was looking only at Lucy.

"You see," he said, rolling over and struggling up on one elbow, "the thing is –"

"Lie down," said the doctor.

"Go jump out the air lock," said Cully. "The thing is, honey, you can't build spaceships without a lot of expensive equipment and tools, and trained personnel. You need a spaceship-building industry. And you have to get the equipment, tools, and people from somewhere else to start with. You can't get 'em unless you can trade for 'em. And you can't trade freely without ships of your own, which the Confederation, by forcing us to ship through them, makes it impossible for us to have.

"So you see how it works out," said Cully. "It works out you've got to have shipping before you can build shipping. And if people on the outside refuse to let you have it by proper means, simply because they've got a good thing going and don't want to give it up – then some of us just have to break loose and go after it any way we can."

"Oh, Cully!"

Suddenly she was on her knees by the bed and her arms were around him.

"Of course the Confederation news services have been trying to keep up the illusion we're sort of half jungle-jims, half wild-west characters," said the doctor. "Once a person takes a good look at the situation on the New Worlds; though, with his eyes open –" He stopped. They were not listening.

"I might mention," he went on, a little more loudly, "while Cully here may not be exactly rich, he does have a rather impressive medal due him, and a commission as Brevet-Admiral in the upcoming New Worlds Space Force. The New Worlds Congress voted him both at their meeting just last week on Asterope, as soon as they'd finished drafting their Statement of Independence –"

But they were still not listening. It occurred to the doctor then that he had better uses for this time – here on this vessel where he had been ship's doctor ever since she first lifted into space – than to stand around talking to deaf ears.

He went out, closing the door of the sick bay on the former *Princess of Argyle* quietly behind him.

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I have a personal weakness for zany stories and demented heroes (they're easier for me to identify with), but that's not why I like this story so much. Most of us writers are a bit superstitious about creativity – we don't like to examine the creative process in any detail; we shy away from trying to discover where all those funny little ideas come from. Perhaps we think of the Muse as a timid unicorn, who will flee forever if we beat the bushes for her. Or perhaps we are wary of getting locked in a Centipede's Dilemma. Gordy wades right in, of course.

What is genius? A good question. And when it's asked by a genius, it's a courageous one.

Ah, forget it. Have fun.

IDIOT SOLVANT

The afternoon sun, shooting the gap of the missing slat in the venetian blind on the window of Art Willoughby's small rented room, splashed fair in Art's eyes, blinding him.

"Blast!" muttered Art. "Got to do something about that sun."

He flipped one long, lean hand up as an eyeshield and leaned forward once more over the university news sheet, unaware that he had reacted with his usual gesture and litany to the sun in his eyes. His mouth watered. He spread out his sharp elbows on the experiment-scarred surface of his desk and reread the ad.

Volunteers for medical research testing. \$1.60 hr., rm., board. Dr. Henry Rapp, Room 432, A Bldg., University Hospital.

"Board –" echoed Art aloud, once more unaware he had spoken. He licked his lips hungrily. *Food*, he thought. Plus wages. And hospital food was supposed to be good. If they would just let him have all he wanted . . .

Of course, it would be worth it for the dollar-sixty an hour alone.

"I'll be sensible," thought Art. "I'll put it in the bank and just draw out what I need. Let's see – one week's work, say – seven times twenty-four times sixteen. Twosix-eight-eight – to the tenth. Two hundred sixty-eight dollars and eighty cents . . ."

That much would support him for – mentally, he totted up his daily expenses. Ordinary expenses, that was. Room, a dollar-fifty. One-and-a-half-pound loaf of day-old bread at half price – thirteen cents. Half a pound of peanut butter, at ninety-eight cents for the three-pound economy size jar – seventeen cents roughly. One all-purpose vitamin capsule – ten cents. Half a head of cabbage, or whatever was in season and cheap – approximately twelve cents. Total, for shelter with all utilities paid and a change of sheets on the bed once a week, plus thirty-two hundred calories a day – two dollars and two cents.

Two dollars and two cents. Art sighed. Sixty dollars and sixty cents a month for mere existence. It was heartbreaking. When sixty dollars would buy a fine double magnum of imported champagne at half a dozen of the better restaurants in town, or a 1954 used set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, or the parts from a mail-order house so that he could build himself a little ocean-hopper shortwave receiver so that he could tune in on foreign language broadcasts and practice understanding German, French, and Italian.

Art sighed. He had long ago come to the conclusion that since the two billion other people in the world could not very well all be out of step at the same time, it was probably he who was the odd one. Nowadays he no longer tried to fight the situation, but let himself reel uncertainly through life, sustained by the vague, persistent conviction that somewhere, somehow, in some strange fashion destiny would eventually be bound to call on him to have a profound effect on his fellowmen.

It was a good twenty-minute walk to the university. Art scrambled lankily to his feet, snatched an ancient leather jacket off the hook holding his bagpipes, put his slide rule up on top of the poetry anthologies in the bookcase so he would know where to find it again – that being the most unlikely place, Q.E.D. – turned off his miniature electric furnace in which he had been casting up a gold pawn for his chess set, left some bread and peanut butter for his pet raccoon, now asleep in the wastebasket, and hurried off, closing the door.

"There's one more," said Margie Hansen, Dr. Hank Rapp's lab assistant. She hesitated. "I think you'd better see him." Hank looked up from his desk, surprised. He was a short, cheerful, tough-faced man in his late thirties.

"Why?" he said. "Some difficulties? Don't sign him up if you don't want to."

"No. No . . . I just think maybe you'd better talk to him. He passed the physical all right. It's just . . . well, you have a look at him."

"I don't get it," said Hank. "But send him in."

She opened the door behind her and leaned out through it.

"Mr. Willoughby, will you come in now?" She stood aside and Art entered. "This is Dr. Rapp, Mr. Willoughby. Doctor, this is Art Willoughby." She went out rather hastily, closing the door behind her.

"Sit down," said Hank, automatically. Art sat down, and Hank blinked a little at his visitor. The young man sitting opposite him resembled nothing so much as an unbearded Abe Lincoln. A *thin* unbearded Abe Lincoln, if it was possible to imagine our sixteenth President as being some thirty pounds lighter than he actually had been.

"Are you a student at the university here?" asked Hank, staring at the decrepit leather jacket.

"Well, yes," said Art, hoping the other would not ask him what college he was in. He had been in six of them, from Theater Arts to Engineering. His record in each was quite honorable. There was nothing to be ashamed of – it was just always a little bit difficult to explain.

"Well –" said Hank. He saw now why Margie had hesitated. But if the man was in good enough physical shape, there was no reason to refuse him. Hank made up his mind. "Has the purpose of this test been explained to you?"

"You're testing a new sort of stay-awake pill, aren't you?" said Art. "Your nurse told me all about it."

"Lab assistant," corrected Hank automatically. "There's no reason you can think of yourself, is there, why you shouldn't be one of the volunteers?"

"Well, no. I . . . I don't usually sleep much," said Art, painfully.

"That's no barrier." Hank smiled. "We'll just keep you awake until you get tired. How much do you sleep?" he asked, to put the younger man at his ease at least a little.

"Oh . . . six or seven hours."

"That's a little less than average. Nothing to get in our way . . . why, what's wrong?" said Hank, sitting up suddenly, for Art was literally struggling with his conscience, and his Abe Lincoln face was twisted unhappily.

"A . . . a week," blurted Art.

"A week! Are you –" Hank broke off, took a good look at his visitor and decided he was not kidding. Or at least, believed himself that he was not kidding. "You mean, less than an hour a night?"

"Well, I usually wait to the end of the week – Sunday morning's a good time. Everybody else is sleeping then, anyway. I get it over all at once –" Art leaned forward and put both his long hands on Hank's desk, pleadingly. "But can't you test me, anyway, Doctor? I need this job. Really, I'm desperate. If you could use me as a control, or something –"

"Don't worry," said Hank, grimly. "You've got the job. In fact if what you say is true, you've got more of a job than the rest of the volunteers. This is something we're all going to want to see!"

"Well," said Hank, ten days later. "Willoughby surely wasn't kidding."

Hank was talking to Dr. Arlie Bohn, of the Department of Psychology. Arlie matched Hank's short height, but outdid him otherwise to the tune of some fifty pounds and fifteen years. They were sitting in Hank's office, smoking cigarettes over the remains of their bag lunches.

"You don't think so?" said Arlie, lifting blond eyebrows toward his half-bare, round skull.

"Arlie! Ten days!"

"And no hallucinations?"

"None"

"Thinks his nurses are out to poison him? Doesn't trust the door janitor?"

"No. No. No!"

Arlie blew out a fat wad of smoke. "I don't believe it," he announced.

"I beg your pardon!"

"Oh – not you, Hank. No insults intended. But this boy of yours is running some kind of a con. Sneaking some sort of stimulant when you aren't looking."

"Why would he do that? We'd be glad to give him all the stimulants he wants. He won't take them. And even if he was sneaking something – ten days. Arlie! Ten days and he looks as if he just got up after a good eight hours in his own bed." Hank smashed his half-smoked cigarette out in the ashtray. "He's not cheating. He's a freak."

"You can't be that much of a freak."

"Oh, can't you?" said Hank. "Let me tell you some more about him. Usual body temperature – about one degree above normal average."

"Not unheard of. You know that."

"Blood pressure a hundred and five systolic, sixty-five diastolic. Pulse, fifty-five a minute. Height, six feet four, weight when he came in here a hundred and forty-two. We've been feeding him upward of six thousand calories a day since he came in and I swear he still looks hungry. No history of childhood diseases. All his wisdom teeth. No cavities in any teeth. Shall I go on?"

"How is he mentally?"

"I checked up with the university testing bureau. They rate him in the genius range. He's started in six separate colleges and dropped out of each one. No trouble with grades. He gets top marks for a while, then suddenly stops going to class, accumulates a flock of incompletes, and transfers into something else. Arlie," said Hank, breaking off suddenly, lowering his voice and staring hard at the other, "I think we've got a new sort of man here. A mutation."

"Hank," said Arlie, crossing his legs comfortably, "when you get to be my age, you won't be so quick to think that Gabriel's going to sound the last trump in your own particular backyard. This boy's got a few physical peculiarities, he's admittedly bright, and he's conning you. You know our recent theory about sleep and sanity."

"Of course I –"

"Suppose," said Arlie, "I lay it out for you once again. The human being deprived of sleep for any length of time beyond what he's accustomed to begins to show signs of mental abnormality. He hallucinates. He exhibits paranoid behavior. He becomes confused, flies into reasonless rages, and overreacts emotionally to trifles."

"Arthur Willoughby doesn't."

"That's my point." Arlie held up a small, square slab of a hand. "Let me go on. How do we explain these reactions? We theorize that possibly sleep has a function beyond that of resting and repairing the body. In sleep we humans, at least, dream pretty constantly. In our dreams we act out our unhappinesses, our frustrations, our terrors. Therefore sleep, we guess, may be the emotional safety valve by which we maintain our sanity against the intellectual pressures of our lives."

"Granted," said Hank, impatiently. "But Art –"

"Now, let's take something else. The problem-solving mechanism –"

"Damn it, Arlie –"

"If you didn't want my opinion, why did you ring me in on this . . . what was that you just said, Hank?"

"Nothing. Nothing."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear it. As I was saying – the problem-solving mechanism. It has been assumed for centuries that man attacked his intellectual problems consciously, and consciously solved them. Recent attention to this assumption has caused us to consider an alternate viewpoint, of which I may say I" – Arlie folded his hands comfortably over his bulging shirtfront "was perhaps the earliest and strongest proponent. It may well be – I and some others now think – that man is inherently incapable of consciously solving any new intellectual problem."

"The point is, Art Willoughby – what?" Hank broke off suddenly and stared across the crumpled paper bags and wax paper on his desk, at Arlie's chubby countenance. "What?"

"Incapable. Consciously." Arlie rolled the words around in his mouth. "By which I mean," he went on, with a slight grin, "man has no conscious mechanism for the solution of new intellectual problems." He cocked his head at Hank, and paused.

"All right. All right!" fumed Hank. "Tell me."

"There seems to be a definite possibility," said Arlie, capturing a crumb from the piece of wax paper that had enwrapped his ham sandwich, and chewing on it thoughtfully, "that there may be more truth than poetry to the words *inspiration*, *illuminating flash*, and *stroke of genius*. It may well turn out that the new-problem solving mechanism is not under conscious control at all. Hm-m-m, yes. Did I tell you Marta wants me to try out one of these new all-liquid reducing diets? When a wife starts that –"

"Never mind Marta!" shouted Hank. "What about nobody being consciously capable of solving a problem?"

Arlie frowned.

"What I'm trying to say," he said, "is that when we try to solve a problem consciously, we are actually only utilizing an attention-focusing mechanism. Look, let me define a so-called 'new problem' for you –"

"One that you haven't bumped into before."

"No," said Arlie. "No. Now you're falling into a trap." He wagged a thick finger at Hank; a procedure intensely irritating to Hank, who suffered a sort of adrenalin explosion the moment he suspected anybody of lecturing down to him. "Does every hitherto undiscovered intersection you approach in your car constitute a new problem in automobile navigation? Of course not. A truly new problem is not merely some variation or combination of factors from problems you have encountered before. It's a problem that for you, at least, previously did not even exist. It is, in fact, *a problem created by the solution of a problem of equal value in the past.*"

"All right. Say it is," scowled Hank. "Then what?"

"Then," said Arlie, "a true problem must always pose the special condition that no conscious tools of education or experience yet exist for its solution. Ergo, it cannot be handled on the conscious level. The logic of conscious thought is like the limb structure of the elephant, which, though ideally adapted to allow seven tons of animal a six-and-a-half-foot stride, absolutely forbids it the necessary spring to jump across a seven-foot trench that bars its escape from the zoo. For the true problem, you've got to get from hyar to thar without any stepping stone to help you across the gap that separates you from the solution. So, you're up against it, Hank. You're in a position where you can't fly but you got to. What do you do?"

"You tell me," glowered Hank.

"The answer's simple," said Arlie, blandly. "You fly."

"But you just said I couldn't!" Hank snapped.

"What I said," said Arlie, "was two things. One, you can't fly; two, you got to fly. What you're doing is

clinging to one, which forces you to toss out two. What I'm pointing out is that you should cling to two, which tosses out one. Now, your conscious, experienced, logical mind knows you can't fly. The whole idea's silly. It won't even consider the problem. But your unconscious – haa!"

"What about my unconscious?"

"Why, your unconscious isn't tied down by any ropes of logical process like that. When it wants a solution, it just goes looking for it."

"Just like that."

"Well," Arlie frowned, "not just like that. First it has to fire up a sort of little donkey-engine of its own which we might call the intuitive mechanism. And that's where the trickiness comes in. Because the intuitive mechanism seems to be all power and no discipline. Its great usefulness comes from the fact that it operates under absolutely no restrictions – and of course this includes the restriction of control by the conscious mind. It's a sort of idiot savant . . . no, idiot solvant would be a better term." He sighed.

"So?" said Hank, after eyeing the fat man for a moment. "What's the use of it all? If we can't control it, what good is it?"

"What good is it?" Arlie straightened up. "Look at art. Look at science! Look at civilization. You aren't going to deny the existence of inspirations, are you? They exist – and one day we're going to find some better method of sparking them than the purely inductive process of operating the conscious, attention-focusing mechanism in hopes that something will catch."

"You think that's possible?"

"I know it's possible."

"I see," said Hank. There was a moment or so of silence in the office. "Well," said Hank, "about this little problem of my own, which I hate to bring you back to, but you did say the other day you had some ideas about this Art Willoughby. Of course, you were probably only speaking inspirationally, or perhaps I should say, without restriction by the conscious mind –"

"I was just getting to that," interrupted Arlie. "This Art Willoughby obviously suffers from what educators like to call poor work habits. Hm-m-m, yes. Underdevelopment of the conscious, problem-focusing mechanism. He tries to get by on a purely intuitive basis. When this fails him, he is helpless. He gives upwitness his transfers from college to college. On the other hand, when it works good, it works very, very good. He has probably come up with some way of keeping himself abnormally stimulated, either externally or internally. The only trouble will be that he probably isn't even conscious of it, and he certainly has no control over it. He'll fall asleep any moment now. And when he wakes up you'll want him to duplicate his feat of wakefulness but he won't be able to do it."

Hank snorted disbelievingly.

"All right," said Arlie. "All right. Wait and see."

"I will," said Hank. He stood up. "Want to come along and see him? He said he was starting to get foggy this morning. I'm going to try him with the monster."

"What," wondered Arlie, ingenuously, rising, "if it puts him to sleep?"

Hank threw him a glance of pure fury.

"Monster!" commanded Hank. He, Arlie, and Margie Hansen were gathered in Art's hospital room, which was a pleasant, bedless place already overflowing with books and maps. Art, by hospital rules deprived of such things as tools and pets, had discovered an interest in the wars of Hannibal of Carthage. At the present moment he was trying to pick the truth out of the rather confused reports following Hannibal's escape from the Romans, after Antioehus had been defeated at Magnesia and surrendered his great general to Rome.

Right now, however, he was forced to lay his books aside and take the small white capsule which Margie, at Hank's order, extended to him. Art took it; then hesitated.

"Do you think it'll make me very jittery?" he asked.

"It should just wake you up," said Hank.

"I told you how I am with things like coffee. That's why I never drink coffee, or take any stimulants. Half a cup and my eyes feel like they're going to pop out of my head."

"There wouldn't," said Hank a trifle sourly, "be much point in our paying you to test out the monster if you refused to take it, now would there?"

"Oh . . . oh, no," said Art, suddenly embarrassed. "Water?"

Margie gave him a full glass and threw an unkind glance at her superior.

"If it starts to bother you, Art, you tell us right away," she said.

Art gulped the capsule down. He stood there waiting as if he expected an explosion from the region of his stomach. Nothing happened, and after a second or two he relaxed.

"How long does it take?" he asked.

"About fifteen minutes," said Hank.

They waited. At the end of ten minutes, Art began to brighten up and said he was feeling much more alert. At fifteen minutes, he was sparkling-eyed and cheerful, almost, in fact, bouncy.

"Awfully sorry, Doctor," he said to Hank. "Awfully sorry I hesitated over taking the monster that way. It was just that coffee and things –"

"That's all right," said Hank, preparing to leave. "Margie'll take you down for tests now."

"Marvelous pill. I recommend it highly," said Art, going out the door with Margie. They could hear him headed off down the corridor outside toward the laboratory on the floor below, still talking.

"Well?" said Hank.

"Time will tell," said Arlie.

"Speaking of time," continued Hank, "I've got the plug-in coffeepot back at the office. Have you got time for a quick cup?"

". . . Don't deny it," Hank was saying over half-empty cups in the office a short while later. "I heard you; I read you loud and clear. If a man makes his mind up to it, he can fly, you said."

"Not at all. And besides, I was only speaking academically," retorted Arlie, heatedly. "Just because I'm prepared to entertain fantastic notions academically doesn't mean I'm going to let you try to shove them down my throat on a practical basis. Of course nobody can fly."

"According to your ideas, someone like Willoughby could if he punched the right buttons in him."

"Nonsense. Certainly he can't fly."

There was the wild patter of feminine feet down the hallway outside the office, the door was flung open, and Margie tottered in. She clung to the desk and gasped, too out of wind to talk.

"What's wrong?" cried Hank.

"Art . . ." Margie managed, "flew out – lab window."

Hank jumped to his feet, and pulled his chair out for her. She fell into it gratefully.

"Nonsense!" said Arlie. "Illusion. Or" – he scowled at Margie – "collusion of some sort."

"Got your breath back yet? What happened?" Hank was demanding. Margie nodded and drew a deep breath.

"I was testing him," she said, still breathlessly. "He was talking a blue streak and I could hardly get him to stand still. Something about Titus Quintus Flamininius, the three-body problem, Sauce Countess Waleska, the family Syrphidae of the order Diptera – all mixed up. Oh, he was babbling! And all of a sudden he dived out an open window."

"Dived?" barked Arlie. "I thought you said he flew?"

"Well, the laboratory's on the third floor!" wailed Margie, almost on the verge of tears.

Further questioning elicited the information that when Margie ran to the window, expecting to see a shattered ruin on the grass three stories below, she perceived Art swinging by one arm from the limb of an oak outside the window. In response to sharp queries from Arlie, she asserted vehemently that the closest grabable limb of the oak was, however, at least eight feet from the window out which Art had jumped, fallen, or dived.

"And then what?" said Hank.

Then, according to Margie, Art had uttered a couple of Tarzan-like yodels, and swung himself to the ground. When last seen he had been running off across the campus through the cool spring sunlight, under the budding trees, in his slacks and shirt unbuttoned at the throat. He had been heading in a roughly northeasterly direction – *i.e.* , toward town – and occasionally bounding into the air as if from a sheer access of energy.

"Come on!" barked Hank, when he had heard this. He led the way at a run toward the hospital parking lot three stories below and his waiting car.

On the other side of the campus, at a taxi stand, the three of them picked up Art's trail. A cab driver waiting there remembered someone like Art taking another cab belonging to the same company. When Hank identified the passenger as a patient under his, Hank's, care, and further identified himself as a physician from the university hospital, the cab driver they were talking to agreed to call in for the destination of Art's cab.

The destination was a downtown bank. Hank, Arlie, and Margie piled back into Hank's car and went there. When they arrived, they learned that Art had already come and gone, leaving some confusion behind him. A vice-president of the bank, it appeared, had made a loan to Art of two hundred and sixty-eight dollars and eighty cents; and was now, it seemed, not quite sure as to why he had done so.

"He just talked me into it, I guess," the vice-president was saying unhappily as Hank and the others came dashing up. It further developed that Art had had no collateral. The vice-president had been given the impression that the money was to be used to develop some confusing but highly useful discovery or discoveries concerning Hannibal, encyclopedias, the sweat fly, and physics – with something about champagne and a way of preparing trout for the gourmet appetite.

A further check with the cab company produced the information that Art's taxi had taken him on to a liquor store. They followed. At the liquor store they discovered that Art had purchased the single jeroboam of champagne (Moët et Chandon) that the liquor store had on hand, and had mentioned that he was going on to a restaurant. What restaurant, the cab company was no longer able to tell them. Art's driver had just announced that he would not be answering his radio for the next half hour.

They began checking the better and closer restaurants. At the fourth one, which was called the Calice d'Or, they finally ran Art to ground. They found him seated alone at a large round table, surrounded by gold-tooled leather volumes of a brand-new encyclopedia, eating and drinking what turned out to be Truite Sauce Countess Walewska and champagne from the jeroboam, now properly iced.

"Yahoo!" yelled Art, as he saw them approaching. He waved his glass on high, sloshing champagne liberally about. "Champagne for everybody! Celebrate Dr. Rapp's pill!"

"You," said Hank, "are coming back to the hospital."

"Nonsense! Glasses! Champagne for m'friends!"

"Oh, Art!" cried Margie.

"He's fried to the gills," said Arlie.

"Not at all," protested Art. "Illuminated. Blinding flash. Understand everything. D'you know all knowledge has a common point of impingement?"

"Call a taxi, Margie," commanded Hank.

"Encyclopedia. Champagne bubble. Same thing."

"Could I help you, sir?" inquired a waiter, approaching Hank.

"We want to get our friend here home —"

"All roads lead knowledge. Unnerstand ignorance, unnerstand everything —"

"I understand, sir. Yes sir, he paid the check in advance —"

"Would *you* like to speak three thousand, four hundred and seventy-one languages?" Art was asking Arlie.

"Of course," Arlie was saying, soothingly.

"My assistant has gone to get a taxi, now. I'm Dr. Rapp of the university hospital, and —"

"When I was child," announced Art, "thought as child, played child; now man — put away childish things."

"Here's the young lady, sir."

"But who will take care of pet raccoon?"

"I flagged a taxi down. It's waiting out front."

"Hoist him up," commanded Hank.

He and Arlie both got a firm hold on a Willoughby arm and maneuvered Art to his feet.

"This way," said Hank, steering Art toward the door.

"The universe," said Art. He leaned confidentially toward Hank, almost toppling the three of them over. "Only two inches across."

"That so?" grunted Hank.

"Hang on to Arlie, Art, and you won't fall over. There —" said Margie. Art blinked and focused upon her with some difficulty.

"Oh . . . there you are —" he said. "Love you. Naturally. Only real woman in universe. Other four point seven to the nine hundred seventeenth women in universe pale imitations. Marry me week Tuesday, three P.M., courthouse, wear blue." Margie gasped.

"Open the door for us, will you?"

"Certainly, sir," said the waiter, opening the front door to the Calice d'Or. A pink and gray taxi was drawn up at the curb.

"Sell stock in Wehauk Cannery immediately," Art was saying to the waiter. "Mismanagement. Collapse." The waiter blinked and stared. "News out in ten days."

"But how did you know I had –" the waiter was beginning as they shoved Art into the back seat of the cab. Margie got in after him.

"Ah, there you are," came Art's voice from the cab. "First son Charles Jonas – blond hair, blue eyes. Second son, William –"

"I'll send somebody to pick up that encyclopedia and anything else he left," said Hank to the waiter and got into the taxi himself. The taxi pulled away from the curb.

"Well," said the waiter, after a long pause in which he stared after the receding cab, to the doorman who had just joined him on the sidewalk, "how do you like that? Ever see anything like that before?"

"No, and I never saw anyone with over a gallon of champagne in him still walking around, either," said the doorman.

". . . And the worst of it is," said Hank to Arlie, as they sat in Hank's office, two days later, "Margie is going to marry him."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Arlie.

"What's wrong with it? Look at that!" Hank waved his hand at an object in the center of his desk.

"I've seen it," said Arlie.

They both examined the object. It appeared to be an ordinary moveable telephone with a cord and wall plug. The plug, however, was plugged into a small cardboard box the size of a cheese carton, filled with a tangled mess of wire and parts cannibalized from a cheap portable radio. The box was plugged into nothing.

"What was that number again . . . oh, yes," said Arlie. He picked up the phone and dialed a long series of numbers. He held the phone tip so that they could both hear. There was a faint buzzing ring from the earphone and then a small, tinny voice filled the office.

". . . The time is eight forty-seven. The temperature is eighteen degrees above zero, the wind westerly at eight miles an hour. The forecast for the Anchorage area is continued cloudy and some snow with a high of twenty-two degrees, a low tonight of nine above. Elsewhere in Alaska –"

Arlie sighed, and replaced the phone in its cradle.

"We bring him back here," said Hank, "stewed to the gills. In forty minutes, before he passed out, he builds this trick wastebasket of his that holds five times as much as it ought to. He sleeps seven hours and wakes up as good as ever. What should I do? Shoot him, or something? I must have some responsibility to the human race – if not to Marcie."

"He seems sensible now?"

"Yes, but what do I do?"

"Hypnosis."

"You keep saying that. I don't see –"

"We must," said Arlie, "inhibit the connection of his conscious mind with the intuitive mechanism. The wall between the two – the normal wall – seems to have been freakishly thin in his case. Prolonged sleeplessness, combined with the abnormal stimulation of your monster, has caused him to break through – to say to the idiot solvent, 'Solve!' And the idiot solvent in the back of his head has provided him with a solution."

"I still think it would be better for me to shoot him."

"You are a physician –"

"You would remind me of that. All right, so I can't shoot him. I don't even want to shoot him. But, Arlie, what's going to happen to everybody? Here I've raised up a sort of miracle worker who can probably move the North American continent down to the South Pacific if he wants to – only it just happens he's also a feather-headed butterfly who never lit on one notion for more than live minutes at a time in his life. Sure, I've got a physician's responsibility toward him. But what about my responsibility to the rest of the people in the world?"

"There is no responsibility being violated here," said Arlie patiently. "Simply put him back the way you found him."

"No miracles?"

"None. At least, except accidental ones."

"It might be kinder to shoot him."

"Nonsense," said Arlie sharply. "It's for the good of everybody." Hank sighed, and rose.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

They went down the hall to Art's room. They found him seated thoughtfully in his armchair, staring at nothing, his books and maps ignored around him.

"Good morning, Art," said Arlie.

"Oh? Hello," said Art, waking up. "Is it time for tests?"

"In a way," said Arlie. He produced a small box surmounted by a cardboard disk on which were inked

alternate spirals of white and black. He plugged the box into a handy electric socket by means of the cord attached to it, and set it on a small table in front of Art. The disk began to revolve. "I want you to watch that," said Arlie.

Art stared at it.

"What do you see?" asked Arlie.

"It looks like going down a tunnel," said Art.

"Indeed it does," said Arlie. "Just imagine yourself going down that tunnel. Down the tunnel. Faster and faster . . ." He continued to talk quietly and persuasively for about a minute and a half, at the end of which Art was limply demonstrating a state of deep trance. Arlie brought him up a bit for questioning.

". . . And how do these realizations, these answers, come to you?" Arlie was asking a few minutes later.

"In a sort of a flash," replied Art. "A blinding flash."

"That is the way they have always come to you?"

"More lately," said Art.

"Yes," said Arlie, "that's the way it always is just before people outgrow these flashes – you know that."

There was a slight pause.

"Yes," said Art.

"You have now outgrown these flashes. You have had your last flash. Flashes belong to childhood. You have had a delayed growing-up, but from now on you will think like an adult. Logically. You will think like an adult. Repeat after me."

"I will think like an adult," intoned Art.

Arlie continued to hammer away at his point for a few more minutes; then he brought Art out of his trance, with a final command that if Art felt any tendency to a recurrence of his flashes he should return to Arlie for further help in suppressing them.

"Oh, hello, Doctor," said Art to Hank, as soon as he woke up. "Say, how much longer are you going to need me as a test subject?"

Hank made a rather unhappy grimace. "In a hurry to leave?" he said.

"I don't know," said Art, enthusiastically, rubbing his long hands together as he sat up in the chair, "but I was just thinking maybe it's time I got to work. Settled clown. As long as I'm going to be a married man shortly."

"We can turn you loose today, if you want," said Hank.

Illustration by RICK BRYANT

When Art stepped once more into his room, closing the door behind him and taking off his leather jacket to hang it up on the hook holding his bagpipes, the place seemed so little changed that it was hard to believe ten full days had passed. Even the raccoon was back asleep in the wastebasket. It was evident the landlady had been doing her duty about keeping the small animal fed – Art had worried a little about that. The only difference, Art thought, was that the room seemed to feel smaller.

He sighed cheerfully and sat down at the desk, drawing pencil and paper to him. The afternoon sun, shooting the gap of the missing slat on the venetian blind at the window, splashed fair in Art's eyes, blinding him.

"Blast!" he said aloud. "Got to do something about that –"

He checked himself suddenly with one hand halfway up to shield his eyes, and smiled. Opening a drawer of the desk, he took out a pair of heavy kitchen scissors. He made a single cut into the rope slot at each end of the plastic slat at the bottom of the blind, snapped the slat out of position, and snapped it back in where the upper slat was missing.

Still smiling, he picked up the pencil and doodled the name Margie with a heart around it in the upper left-hand corner as he thought, with gaze abstracted. The pencil moved to the center of the piece of

paper and hovered there.

After a moment, it began to sketch.

What it sketched was a sort of device to keep the sun out of Art's eyes. At the same time, however, it just happened to be a dome-shaped all-weather shield capable of protecting a city ten miles in diameter the year round. The "skin" of the dome consisted of a thin layer of carbon dioxide such as one finds in the bubbles of champagne, generated and maintained by magnetic lines of force emanating from three heavily charged bodies, in rotation about each other at the apex of the dome and superficially housed in a framework the design of which was reminiscent of the wing structure found in the family Syrphidae of the order Diptera.

Art continued to smile as the design took form. But it was a thoughtful smile, a mature smile. Hank and Arlie had been quite right about him. He had always been a butterfly, flitting from notion to notion, playing.

But then, too, he had always been a bad hypnotic subject, full of resistances.

And he was about to have a wife to care for. Consequently it is hard to say whether Arlie and Hank would have been reassured if they could have seen Art at that moment. His new thinking was indeed adult, much more so than the other two could have realized. Where miracles were concerned, he had given up playing.

Now, he was *working* .

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A strikingly different view of mankind, and a most unusual story for Gordy, the greatest discovery-delight I had in reading these pages. And I'm not sure I can explain why without creating the wrong impression.

You see, I have read a lot of slushpile – *the technical term for unsolicited manuscripts, sent to magazines or writers' workshops by aspiring amateurs. And the theme of this story is a slushpile regular – second in popularity only to the one about the only two survivors of a planetary disaster who ground their lifeship safely on a habitable new planet and it turns out their names are Adam and Eve. For some reason beyond my grasping, God in His Downtown Providence ordained that everyone who ever tried to write, tried to write this story. They are, invariably, awful.*

Well, everybody makes an ashtray their first week in shop class (and sometimes their last), and they always stink too. Here's the ashtray the shop teacher made.

How terrible (goes the ubiquitous theme) it must be to be a god . . . and be cursed with empathy. It wouldn't be so bad if you could just hate the little buggers!

But to be a god is, by definition, to be . . .

OF THE PEOPLE

But you know, I could sense it coming a long time off. It was a little extra time taken in drinking a cup of coffee, it was lingering over the magazines in a drugstore as I picked out a handful. It was a girl I looked at twice as I ran out and down the steps of a library.

And it wasn't any good and I knew it. But it kept coming and it kept coming, and one night I stayed working at the design of a power cruiser until it was finished, before I finally knocked off for supper. Then, after I'd eaten, I looked ahead down twelve dark hours to daylight, and I knew I'd had it.

So I got up and I walked out of the apartment. I left my glass half-full and the record player I had built playing the music I had written to the pictures I had painted. Left the organ and the typewriter, left the darkroom and the lab. Left the jammed-full filing cabinets. Took the elevator and told the elevator boy to head for the ground floor. Walked out into the deep snow.

"You going out in January without an overcoat, Mr. Crossman?" asked the doorman.

"Don't need a coat," I told him. "Never no more, no coats."

"Don't you want me to phone the garage for your car, then?"

"Don't need a car."

I left him and set out walking. After a while it began to snow, but not on me. And after a little more while people started to stare, so I flagged down a cab.

"Get out and give me the keys," I told the driver.

"You drunk?" he said.

"It's all right, son," I said. "I own the company. But you'll get out nonetheless and give me the keys." He got out and gave me the keys and I left him standing there.

I got in the cab and drove it off through the nightlit downtown streets, and I kissed the city good-by as I went. I blew a kiss to the grain exchange and a kiss to the stockyards. And a kiss to every one of the fourteen offices in the city that knew me each under a different title as head of a different business. You've got to get along without me now, city and people, I said, because I'm not coming back, no more,

no more.

I drove out of downtown and out past Longview Acres and past Manor Acres and past Sherman Hills and I blew them all a kiss, too. Enjoy your homes, you people, I told them, because they're good homes – not the best I could have done you by a damn sight, but better than you'll see elsewhere in a long time, and your money's worth. Enjoy your homes and don't remember me.

I drove out to the airport and there I left the cab. It was a good airport. I'd laid it out myself and I knew. It was a good airport and I got eighteen days of good hard work out of the job. I got myself so lovely and tired doing it I was able to go out to the bars and sit there having half a dozen drinks – before the urge to talk to the people around me became unbearable and I had to get up and go home.

There were planes on the field. A good handful of them. I went in and talked to one of the clerks. "Mr. Crossman!" he said, when he saw me.

"Get me a plane," I said. "Get me a plane headed east and then forget I was in tonight."

He did; and I went. I flew to New York and changed planes and flew to London; and changed again and came in by jet to Bombay.

By the time I reached Bombay, my mind was made up for good, and I went through the city as if it were a dream of buildings and people and no more. I went through the town and out of the town and I hit the road north, walking. And as I walked, I took off my coat and my tie. And I opened my collar to the open air and I started my trek.

Illustration by RICK BRYANT

I was six weeks walking it. I remember little bits and pieces of things along the way – mainly faces, and mainly the faces of the children, for they aren't afraid when they're young. They'd come up to me and run alongside, trying to match the strides I'd take, and after a while they'd get tired and drop back – but there were always others along the way. And there were adults, too, men and women, but when they got close they'd take one look at my face and go away again. There was only one who spoke to me in all that trip, and that was a tall, dark brown man in some kind of uniform. He spoke to me in English and I answered him in dialect. He was scared to the marrow of his bones, for after he spoke I could hear the little grinding of his teeth in the silence as he tried to keep them from chattering. But I answered him kindly, and told him I had business in the north that was nobody's business but my own. And when he still would not move – he was well over six feet and nearly as tall as I – I opened my right hand beneath his nose and showed him himself, small and weak as a caterpillar in the palm of it. And he fell out of my path as if his legs had all the strength gone out of them, and I went on.

I was six weeks walking it. And when I came to the hills, my beard was grown out and my pants and my shirt were in tatters. Also, by this time, the word had gone ahead of me. Not the official word, but the little words of little people, running from mouth to mouth. They knew I was coming and they knew where I was headed – to see the old man up behind Mutteeanee Pass, the white-bearded, holy man of the village between two peaks.

He was sitting on his rock out on the hillside, with his blind eyes following the sun and the beard running white and old between his thin knees and down to the brown earth.

I sat down on a smaller rock before him and caught my breath.

"Well, Erik," I said. "I've come."

"I'm aware you have, Sam."

"By foot," I said. "By car and plane, too, but mostly by foot, as time goes. All the way from the lowlands by foot, Erik. And that's the last I do for any of them."

"For them, Sam?"

"For me, then."

"Nor for you, either, Sam," he said. And then he sighed. "Go back, Sam," he said.

"Go back!" I echoed. "Go back to hell again? No thank you, Erik."

"You faltered," he said. "You weakened. You began to slow down, to look around. There was no need to, Sam. If you hadn't started to slacken off, you would have been all right."

"All right? Do you call the kind of life I lead, that? What do you use for a heart, Erik?"

"A heart?" And with that he lowered his blind old eyes from the sun and turned them right on me. "Do you accuse me, Sam?"

"With you it's choice," I said. "You can go."

"No," he shook his head. "I'm bound by choice, just as you are bound by the greater strength in me. Go back, Sam."

"Why?" I cried. And I pounded my chest like a crazy man. "Why me? Why can others go and I have to stay? There's no end to the universe. I don't ask for company. I'll find some lost hole somewhere and bury myself. Anywhere, just so I'm away."

"Would you, Sam?" He asked. And at that, there was pity in his voice. When I did not answer, he went on, gently. "You see, Sam, that's exactly why I can't let you go. You're capable of deluding yourself, of telling yourself that you'll do what we both know you will not, cannot do. So you must stay."

"No," I said. "All right." I got up and turned to go. "I came to you first and gave you your chance. But now I'll go on my own, and I'll get off somehow."

"Sam, come back," he said. And abruptly, my legs were mine no longer.

"Sit down again," he said. "And listen for a minute."

My traitorous legs took me back, and I sat.

"Sam," he said, "you know the old story. Now and then, at rare intervals, one like us will be born."

Nearly always, when they are grown, they leave. Only a few stay. But only once in thousands of years does one like yourself appear who must be chained against his will to our world."

"Erik," I said, between my teeth. "Don't sympathize."

"I'm not sympathizing, Sam," he said. "As you said yourself, there is no end to the universe, but I have seen it all and there is no place in it for you. For the others that have gone out, there are places that are no places. They sup at alien tables, Sam, but always and forever as a guest. They left themselves behind when they went and they don't belong any longer to our Earth."

He stopped for a moment, and I knew what was coming.

"But you, Sam," he said, and I heard his voice with my head bowed, staring at the brown dirt. He spoke tenderly. "Poor Sam. You'd never be able to leave the Earth behind. You're one of us, but the living cord binds you to the others. Never a man speaks to you, but your hands yearn toward him in friendship. Never a woman smiles your way, but love warms that frozen heart of yours. You can't leave them, Sam. If you went out now, you'd come back, in time, and try to take them with you. You'd hurry them on before they are ripe. And there's no place out there in the universe for them – yet."

I tried to move, but could not. Tried to lift my face to his, but I could not.

"Poor Sam," he said, "trapped by a common heart that chains the lightning of his brain. Go back, Sam. Go back to your cities and your people. Go back to a thousand little jobs, and the work that is no greater than theirs, but many times as much so that it drives you without a pause twenty, twenty-two hours a day. Go back, Sam, to your designing and your painting, to your music and your business, to your engineering and your landscaping, and all the other things. Go back and keep busy, so busy your brain fogs and you sleep without dreaming. And wait. Wait for the necessary years to pass until they grow and change and at last come to their destiny.

"When that time comes, Sam, they will go out. And you will go with them, blood of their blood, flesh of their flesh, kin and comrade to them all. You will be happier than any of us have ever been, when that time comes. But the years have still to pass, and now you must go back. Go back, Sam. Go back, go back, go back."

And so I have come back. O people that I hate and love!

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Planetary Consciousness is a fine and needed thing, much talked about these days. But it ain't Absolute Truth either. For it is finite, closed – which is to say, less than human. The aliens in this story have a remarkably sane-sounding world view – and it is the duty of the sane to cure the insane, isn't it? Isn't it?

Herein will be heard echoes of Lazarus Long's sobs for Mary Sperling, and perhaps the introductory bars of a Song for Lya. What does it mean to be human?

TIGER GREEN

I

A man with hallucinations he cannot stand, trying to strangle himself in a homemade straitjacket, is not a pretty sight. But after a while, grimly thought Jerry McWhin, the *Star Scout's* navigator, the ugly and terrible seem to backfire in effect, filling you with fury instead of harrowing you further. Men in crowds and packs could be stampeded briefly, but after a while the individual among them would turn, get his back up, and slash back.

At least – the hyperstubborn individual in himself had finally so reacted.

Determinedly, with fingers that fumbled from lack of sleep, he got the strangling man – Wally Blake, an assistant ecologist – untangled and into a position where it would be difficult for him to try to choke out his own life again. Then Jerry went out of the sick-bay storeroom, leaving Wally and the other seven men out of the *Star Scout's* complement of twelve who were in total restraint. He was lightheaded from exhaustion; but a berserk something in him snarled like a cornered tiger and refused to break like Wally and the others.

When all's said and done, he thought half-crazily, there's worse ways to come to the end of it than a last charge, win or lose, alone into the midst of all your enemies.

Going down the corridor, the sight of another figure jolted him a little back toward common sense. Ben Akham, the drive engineer, came trudging back from the air-look corridor with a flame thrower on his back. Soot etched darkly the lines on his once-round face.

"Get the hull cleared?" asked Jerry. Ben nodded exhaustedly.

"There's more jungle on her every morning," he grunted. "Now those big thistles are starting to drip a corrosive liquid. The hull needs an antacid washing. I can't do it. I'm worn out."

"We all are," said Jerry. His own five-eleven frame was down to a hundred and thirty-eight pounds. There was plenty of food – it was just that the four men left on their feet had no time to prepare it; and little enough time to eat it, prepared or not.

Exploration Team Five-Twenty-Nine, thought Jerry, had finally bitten off more than it could chew, here

on the second planet of Star 83476. It was nobody's fault. It had been a gamble for Milt Johnson, the Team captain, either way – to land or not to land. He had landed; and it had turned out bad.

By such small things was the scale toward tragedy tipped. A communication problem with the natives, a native jungle evidently determined to digest the spaceship, and eight of twelve men down with something like suicidal delirium tremens – any two of these things the Team could probably have handled.

But not all three at once.

Jerry and Ben reached the entrance of the Control Room together and peered in, looking for Milt Johnson. "Must be ootside, talking to that native again," said Jerry.

"Ootside? – *oot* – side!" exploded Ben, with a sudden snapping of frayed nerves. "Can't you say 'out-side'? – ' *out*-side,' like everybody else?"

The berserk something in Jerry lunged to be free, but he caught it and hauled it back.

"Get hold of yourself!" he snapped.

"Well . . . I wouldn't mind you sounding like a blasted Scotchman all the time!" growled Ben, getting himself, nevertheless, somewhat under control. "It's just you always do it when I don't expect it!"

"If the Lord wanted us all to sound alike, he'd have propped up the Tower of Babel," said Jerry wickedly. He was not particularly religious himself, but he knew Ben to be a table-thumping atheist. He had the satisfaction now of watching the other man bite his lips and control himself in his turn.

Academically, however, Jerry thought as they both headed out through the ship to find Milt, he could not really blame Ben. For Jerry, like many Scot-Canadians, appeared to speak a very middle-western American sort of English most of the time. But only as long as he avoided such vocabulary items as "house" and "out," which popped off Jerry's tongue as "hoose" and "oot." However, every man aboard had his personal peculiarities. You had to get used to them. That was part of spaceship – in fact, part of human – life.

They emerged from the lock, rounded the nose of the spaceship, and found themselves in the neat little clearing on one side of the ship where the jungle paradoxically refused to grow. In this clearing stood the broad-shouldered figure of Milt Johnson, his whitish-blond hair glinting in the yellow-white sunlight.

Facing Milt was the thin, naked, and saddle-colored humanoid figure of one of the natives from the village, or whatever it was, about twenty minutes away by jungle trail. Between Milt and the native was the glittering metal console of the translator machine.

". . . Let's try it once more," they heard Milt saying as they came up and stopped behind him.

The native gabbled agreeably.

"Yes, yes. Try it again," translated the voice of the console.

"I am Captain Milton Johnson. I am in authority over the crew of the ship you see before me."

"Gladly would I not see it," replied the console on translation of the native's jabblings. "However – I am Communicator, messenger to you sick ones."

"I will call you Communicator, then," began Milt.

"Of course. What else could you call me?"

"Please," said Milt, wearily. "To get back to it – I also am a Communicator."

"No, no," said the native. "You are not a Communicator. It is the sickness that makes you talk this way."

"But," said Milt, and Jerry saw the big, white-haired captain swallow in an attempt to keep his temper. "You will notice, I am communicating with you."

"No, no."

"I see," said Milt patiently. "You mean, we aren't communicating in the sense that we aren't understanding each other. We're talking, but you don't understand me –"

"No, no. I understand you perfectly."

"Well," said Milt, exhaustedly. "I don't understand you."

"That is because you are sick."

Milt blew out a deep breath and wiped his brow. "Forget that part of it, then," he said. "Many of my crew are upset by nightmares we all have been having. They *are* sick. But there are still four of us who are well –"

"No, no. You are all sick," said Communicator earnestly. "But you should love what you call nightmares. All people love them."

"Including you and your people?"

"Of course. Love your nightmares. They will make you well. They will make the little bit of proper life in you grow, and heal you."

Ben snorted beside Jerry. Jerry could sympathize with the other man. The nightmares he had been having during his scant hours of sleep, the past two weeks, came back to his mind, with the indescribably alien, terrifying sensation of drifting in a sort of environmental soup with identifiable things changing shape and identity constantly around him. Even pumped full of tranquilizers, he thought – which reminded Jerry.

He had not taken his tranquilizers lately.

When had he taken some last? Not since he woke up, in any case. Not since . . . yesterday, sometime. Though that was now hard to believe.

"Let's forget that, too, then," Milt was saying. "Now, the jungle is growing all over our ship, in spite of all we can do. You tell me your people can make the jungle do anything you want."

"Yes, yes," said Communicator, agreeably.

"Then, will you please stop it from growing all over our spaceship?"

"We understand. It is your sickness, the poison that makes you say this. Do not fear. We will never abandon you." Communicator looked almost ready to pat Milt consolingly on the head. "You are people, who are more important than any cost. Soon you will grow and cast off your poisoned part and come to us."

"But we can come to you right now!" said Milt, between his teeth. "In fact – we've come to your village a dozen times."

"No, no." Communicator sounded distressed. "You approach, but you do not come. You have never come to us."

Milt wiped his forehead with the back of a wide hand. "I will come back to your village now, with you," he said. "Would you like that?" he asked.

"I would be so happy!" said Communicator. "But – you will not come. You say it, but you do not come."

"All right. Wait –" About to take a hand transceiver from the console, Milt saw the other two men. "Jerry," he said, "you go this time. Maybe he'll believe it if it's you who goes to the village with him."

"I've been there before. With you, the second time you went," objected Jerry. "And I've got to feed the men in restraint, pretty soon," he added.

"Try going again. That's all we can do – try things. Ben and I'll feed the men," said Milt. Jerry, about to argue further, felt the pressure of a sudden wordless, exhausted appeal from Milt. Milt's basic berserkedness must be just about ready to break loose, too, he realized.

"All right," said Jerry.

"Good," said Milt, looking grateful. "We have to keep trying. I should have lifted ship while I still had five well men to lift it with. Come on, Ben – you and I better go feed those men now, before we fall asleep on our feet."

They went away around the nose of the ship. Jerry unhooked the little black-and-white transceiver that would radio-relay his conversations with Communicator back to the console of the translator for sense-making during the trip.

"Come on," he said to Communicator, and led off down the pleasantly wide jungle trail toward the native village.

They passed from under the little patch of open sky above the clearing and into green-roofed stillness. All about them, massive limbs, branches, ferns, and vines intertwined in a majestic maze of growing things. Small flying creatures, looking half-animal and half-insect, flittered among the branches overhead. Some larger, more animal-like creatures sat on the heavier limbs and moaned off-key like abandoned puppies. Jerry's head spun with his weariness, and the green over his head seemed to close down on him like a net flung by some giant, crazy fisherman, to take him captive.

He was suddenly and bitterly reminded of the Team's high hopes, the day they had set down on this world. No other Team or Group had yet to turn up any kind of alien life much more intelligent than an anthropoid ape. Now they, Team 523, had not only uncovered an intelligent, evidently semi-cultured alien people, but an alien people eager to establish relations with the humans and communicate. Here, two weeks later, the natives were still apparently just as eager to communicate, but what they said made no sense.

Nor did it help that, with the greatest of patience and kindness, Communicator and his kind seemed to consider that it was the humans who were irrational and uncommunicative.

Nor that, meanwhile, the jungle seemed to be mounting a specifically directed attack on the human spaceship.

Nor that the nightmare afflicting the humans had already laid low eight of the twelve crew and were grinding the four left on their feet down to a choice between suicidal delirium or collapse from exhaustion.

It was a miracle, thought Jerry, lightheadedly trudging through the jungle, that the four of them had been able to survive as long as they had. A miracle based probably on some individual chance peculiarity of strength that the other eight men in straitjackets lacked. Although, thought Jerry now, that strength that they had so far defied analysis. Dizzily, like a man in a high fever, he considered their four surviving personalities in his mind's eye. They were; he thought, the four men of the team with what you might call the biggest mental crotchets.

— or ornery streaks.

Take the fourth member of the group — the medician, Arthyr Loy, who had barely stuck his nose out of the sick-bay lab in the last forty-eight hours. Not only because he was the closest thing to an M.D. aboard the ship was Art still determined to put the eight restrained men back on their feet again. It just happened, in addition, that Art considered himself the only true professional man aboard, and was not the

kind to admit any inability to the lesser mortals about him.

And Milt Johnson – Milt made an excellent captain. He was a tower of strength, a great man for making decisions. The only thing was, that having decided, Milt could hardly be brought to consider the remote possibility that anyone else might have wanted to decide differently.

Ben Akham was another matter. Ben hated religion and loved machinery – and the jungle surrounding was attacking *his* spaceship. In fact, Jerry was willing to bet that by the time he got back, Ben would be washing the hull with an acid-counteractant in spite of what he had told Jerry earlier.

And himself? Jerry? Jerry shook his head woozily. It was hard to be self-analytical after ten days of three and four hours sleep per twenty. He had what his grandmother had once described as the curse of the Gael – black stubbornness and red rages.

All of these traits, in all four of them, had normally been buried safely below the surfaces of their personalities and had only colored them as individuals. But now, the last two weeks had worn those surfaces down to basic personality bedrock. Jerry shoved the thought out of his mind.

"Well," he said, turning to Communicator, "we're almost to your village now . . . You can't say someone didn't come with you, this time."

Communicator gabbled. The transceiver in Jerry's hand translated.

"Alas," the native said, "but you are not with me."

"Cut it out!" said Jerry wearily. "I'm right here beside you."

"No," said Communicator. "You accompany me, but you are not here. You are back with your dead things."

"You mean the ship and the rest of it?" asked Jerry.

"There is no ship," said Communicator. "A ship must have grown and been alive. Your thing has always been dead. But we will save you."

III

They came out of the path at last into a clearing dotted with whitish, pumpkin-like shells some ten feet in height above the brown earth in which they were half-buried. Wide cracks in the out-curving sides gave view of tangled roots and plants inside, among which other natives could be seen moving about, scratching, tasting, and making holes in the vegetable surfaces.

"Well," said Jerry, making an effort to speak cheerfully, "here I am."

"You are not here."

The berserk tigerishness in Jerry leaped up unawares and took him by the inner throat. For a long second he looked at Communicator through a red haze. Communicator gazed back patiently, evidently unaware how close he was to having his neck broken by a pair of human hands.

"Look—" said Jerry, slowly, between his teeth, getting himself under control, "if you will just tell me what to do to join you and your people, here, I will do it."

"That is good!"

"Then," said Jerry, still with both hands on the inner fury that fought to tear loose inside him, "what do I do?"

"But you know—" The enthusiasm that had come into Communicator a moment before wavered visibly. "You must get rid of the dead things, and set yourself free to grow, inside. Then, after you have grown, your unsick self will bring you here to join us!"

Jerry stared back. Patience, he said harshly to himself.

"Grow? How? In what way?"

"But you have a little bit of proper life in you," explained Communicator. "Not much, of course . . . but if you will rid yourself of dead things and concentrate on what you call nightmares, it will grow and force out the poison of the dead life in you. The proper life and the nightmares are the hope for you—"

"Wait a minute!" Jerry's exhaustion-fogged brain cleared suddenly and nearly miraculously at the sudden surge of excitement into his bloodstream. "This proper life you talk about—does it have something to do with the nightmares?"

"Of course. How could you have what you call nightmares without a little proper life in you to give them to you? As the proper life grows, you will cease to fight so against the 'nightmares' . . ."

Communicator continued to talk earnestly. But Jerry's spinning brain was flying off on a new tangent. What was it he had been thinking earlier about tranquilizers—that he had not taken any himself for some time? Then, what about the nightmares in his last four hours of sleep?

He must have had them—he remembered now that he had had them. But evidently they had not bothered him as much as before—at least, not enough to send him scrambling for tranquilizers to dull the dreams' weird impact on him.

"Communicator!" Jerry grabbed at the thin, leathery-skinned arm of the native. "Have I been chang—growing?"

"I do not know, of course," said the native, courteously. "I profoundly hope so. Have you?"

"Excuse me—" gulped Jerry. "I've got to get out of here—back to th' ship!"

Illustration by RICK BRYANT

He turned, and raced back up the trail. Some twenty minutes later, he burst into the clearing before the ship to find an ominous silence hanging over everything. Only the faint rustle and hissing from the ever-growing jungle swallowing up the ship sounded on his eardrums.

"Milt – Ben!" he shouted, plunging into the ship. A hail from farther down the main corridor reassured him, and he followed it up to find all three unrestrained members of the crew in the sick bay. But – Jerry brought himself up short, his throat closing on him – there was a figure on the table.

"Who . . ." began Jerry. Milt Johnson turned around to face him. The captain's big body mercifully hid most of the silent form on the table.

"Wally Blake," said Milt emptily. "He managed to strangle himself after all. Got twisted up in his restraint jacket. Ben and I heard him thumping around in there, but by the time we got to him, it was too late. Art's doing an autopsy."

"Not exactly an autopsy," came the soft, Virginia voice of the medician from beyond Milt. "Just looking for something I suspected . . . and here it is!"

Milt spun about and Jerry pushed between the big captain and Ben. He found himself looking at the

back of a human head from which a portion of the skull had been removed. What he saw before him was a small expanse of whitish, soft inner tissue that was the brainstem; and fastened to it almost like a grape growing there, was a small, purplish mass.

Art indicated the purple shape with the tip of a sharp, surgical instrument.

"There," he said. "And I bet we've each got one."

"What is it?" asked Ben's voice, hushed and a little nauseated.

"I don't know," said Art harshly. "How the devil would I be able to tell? But I found organisms in the bloodstreams of those of us I've taken blood samples from – organisms like spores, that look like this, only smaller, microscopic in size."

"You didn't tell me that!" said Milt, turning quickly to face him.

"What was the point?" Art turned toward the Team captain. Jerry saw that the medician's long face was almost bloodless. "I didn't know what they were. I thought if I kept looking, I might know more. Then I could have something positive to tell you, as well as the bad news. But – it's no use now."

"Why do you say that?" snapped Milt.

"Because it's the truth." Art's face seemed to slide apart, go loose and waxy with defeat. "As long as it was something nonphysical we were fighting, there was some hope we could throw it off. But – you see what's going on inside us. We're being changed physically. That's where the nightmares come from. You can't overcome a physical change with an effort of will!"

"What about the Grotto at Lourdes?" asked Jerry. His head was whirling strangely with a mass of ideas. His own great-grandfather – the family story came back to mind – had been judged by his physician in 1896 to have advanced pulmonary tuberculosis. Going home from the doctor's office, Simon Fraser McWhin had decided that he could not afford to have tuberculosis at this time. That he would not, therefore, have tuberculosis at all. And he had dismissed the matter fully from his mind.

One year later, examined by the same physician, he had no signs of tuberculosis whatsoever.

But in this present moment, Art, curling up in his chair at the end of the table, seemed not to have heard Jerry's question. And Jerry was suddenly reminded of the question that had brought him pelting back from the native village.

"Is it growing – I mean was it growing when Wally strangled himself – that growth on his brain?" he asked.

Art roused himself.

"Growing?" he repeated dully. He climbed to his feet and picked up an instrument. He investigated the purple mass for a moment.

"No," he said, dropping the instrument wearily and falling back into his chair. "Looks like its outer layer has died and started to be reabsorbed – I think." He put his head in his hands. "I'm not qualified to answer such questions. I'm not trained . . ."

"Who is?" demanded Milt, grimly, looming over the table and the rest of them. "And we're reaching the limit of our strength as well as the limits of what we know –"

"We're done for," muttered Ben. His eyes were glazed, looking at the dissected body on the table. "It's not my fault –"

"Catch him! Catch Art!" shouted Jerry, leaping forward.

But he was too late. The medician had been gradually curling up in his chair since he had sat down in it again. Now, he slipped out of it to the floor, rolled in a ball, and lay still.

"Leave him alone." Milt's large hand caught Jerry and held him back. "He may as well lie there as someplace else." He got to his feet. "Ben's right. We're done for."

"Done for?" Jerry stared at the big man. The words he had just heard were words he would never have imagined hearing from Milt.

"Yes," said Milt. He seemed somehow to be speaking from a long distance off.

"Listen –" said Jerry. The tigerishness inside him had woken at Milt's words. It tugged and snarled against the words of defeat from the captain's lips. "We're winning. We aren't losing!"

"Quit it, Jerry," said Ben dully, from the far end of the room.

"Quit it – ?" Jerry swung on the engineer. "You lost your temper with me before I went down to the village, about the way I said *'oot'*! How could you lose your temper if you were full of tranquilizers? I haven't been taking any myself, and I feel better because of it. Don't tell me you've been taking yours! – and that means we're getting stronger than the nightmares."

"The tranquilizers've been making me sick, if you must know! That's why I haven't been taking them –" Ben broke off, his face graying. He pointed a shaking finger at the purplish mass. "I'm being changed, that's why they made me sick! I'm changing already!" His voice rose toward a scream. "Don't you see, it's changing me –" He broke off, suddenly screaming and leaping at Milt with clawing fingers. "We're all changing! And it's your fault for bringing the ship down here. You did it –"

Milt's huge fist slammed into the side of the smaller man's jaw, driving him to the floor beside the still shape of the medician, where he lay quivering and sobbing.

Slowly Milt lifted his gaze from the fallen man and faced Jerry. It was the standard seventy-two degrees centigrade in the room, but Jerry saw perspiration standing out on Milt's calm face as if he had just stepped out of a steam bath.

"But he may be right," said Milt, emotionlessly. His voice seemed to come from the far end of some lightless tunnel. "We may be changing under the influence of those growths right now – each of us."

"Milt!" said Jerry, sharply. But Milt's face never changed. It was large, and calm, and pale – and drenched with sweat. "Now's the last time we ought to give up! We're starting to understand it now. I tell

you, the thing is to meet Communicator and the other natives head on! Head to head we can crack them wide open. One of us has to go down to that village."

"No. I'm the captain," said Milt, his voice unchanged. "I'm responsible, and I'll decide. We can't lift ship with less than five men and there's only two of us – you and I – actually left. I can't risk one of us coming under the influence of the growth in him, and going over to the alien side."

"Going over?" Jerry stared at him.

"That's what all this has been for – the jungle, the natives, the nightmare. They want to take us over." Sweat ran down Milt's cheeks and dripped off his chin, while he continued to talk tonelessly and gaze straight ahead. "They'll send us – what's left of us – back against our own people. I can't let that happen. We'll have to destroy ourselves so there's nothing for them to use."

"Milt –" said Jerry.

"No." Milt swayed faintly on his feet like a tall tree under a wind too high to be felt on the ground at its base. "We can't risk leaving ship or crew. We'll blow the ship up with ourselves in it –"

"Blow up my ship!"

It was a wild-animal scream from the floor at their feet; and Ben Akham rose from almost under the table like a demented wildcat, aiming for Milt's jugular vein. So unexpected and powerful was the attack that the big captain tottered and fell. With a noise like worrying dogs, they rolled together under the table.

The changed tiger inside Jerry broke its bonds and flung free.

He turned and ducked through the door into the corridor. It was a heavy pressure door with a wheel lock, activating metal dogs to seal it shut in case of a hull blow-out and sudden loss of air. Jerry slammed the door shut, and spun the wheel.

The dogs snicked home. Snatching down the portable fire extinguisher hanging on the wall alongside, Jerry dropped the foam container on the floor and jammed the metal nozzle of its hose between a spoke of the locking wheel and the unlocking stop on the door beneath it.

He paused. There was silence inside the sick-bay lab. Then the wheel jerked against the nozzle and the door tried to open.

"What's going on?" demanded the voice of Milt. There was a pause. "Jerry, what's going on out there? Open up!"

A wild, crazy impulse to hysterical laughter rose inside Jerry without warning. It took all his will power to choke it back.

"You're locked in, Milt," he said.

"Jerry!" The wheel spoke clicked against the jamming metal nozzle, in a futile effort to turn. "Open up! That's an order!"

"Sorry, Milt," said Jerry softly and lightheadedly. "I'm not ready yet to burn the hoose about my ears. This business of you wanting to blow up the ship's the same sort of impulse to suicide that got Wally and

the rest. I'm off to face the natives now and let them have their way with me. I'll be back later, to let you out."

"Jerry!"

Jerry heard Milt's voice behind him as he went off down the corridor.

"Jerry!" There was a fusillade of pounding fists against the door, growing fainter as Jerry moved away. "Don't you see? – that growth in you is finally getting you! Jerry, come back! Don't let them take over one of us! Jerry . . ."

Jerry left the noise and the ship together behind him as he stepped out of the air lock. The jungle, he saw, was covering the ship's hull again, already hiding it for the most part. He went on out to the translator console and began taking off his clothes. When he was completely undressed, he unhooked the transceiver he had brought back from the native village, slung it on a loop of his belt, and hung the belt around his neck.

He headed off down the trail toward the village, wincing a little as the soles of his shoeless feet came into contact with pebbles along the way.

When he got to the village clearing, a naked shape he recognized as that of Communicator tossed up its arms in joy and came running to him.

"Well!" said Jerry. "I've grown. I've got rid of the poison of dead things and the sickness. Here I am to join you!"

"At last!" gabbled Communicator. Other natives were running up. "Throw away the dead thing around your neck!"

"I still need it to understand you," said Jerry. "I guess I need a little help to join you all the way."

"Help? We will help!" cried Communicator. "But you must throw that away. You have rid yourself of the dead things that you kept wrapped around your limbs and body," gabbled Communicator. "Now rid yourself of the dead thing hanging about your neck."

"But I tell you, if I do that," objected Jerry, "I won't be able to understand you when you talk, or make you understand me!"

"Throw it away. It is poisoning you! Throw it away!" said Communicator. By this time three or four more natives had come up and others were headed for the gathering. "Shortly you will understand all, and all will understand you. Throw it away!"

"Throw it away!" chorused the other natives.

"Well . . ." said Jerry. Reluctantly, he took off the belt with the transceiver, and dropped it. Communicator gabbled unintelligibly.

". . . come with me . . ." translated the transceiver like a faint and tinny echo from the ground where it landed.

Communicator took hold of Jerry's hand and drew him toward the nearest whitish structure. Jerry swallowed unobtrusively. It was one thing to make up his mind to do this; it was something else again to actually do it. But he let himself be led to and in through a crack in the structure.

Inside, the place smelled rather like a mixture of a root cellar and a hayloft – earthy and fragrant at the same time. Communicator drew him in among the waist-high tangle of roots rising and reentering the packed earth floor. The other natives swarmed after them. Close to the center of the floor they reached a point where the roots were too thick to allow them to pick their way any further. The roots rose and tangled into a mat, the irregular surface of which was about three feet off the ground. Communicator patted the root surface and gabbled agreeably.

"You want me to get up there?" Jerry swallowed again, then gritted his teeth as the chained fury in him turned suddenly upon himself. There was nothing worse, he snarled at himself, than a man who was long on planning a course of action; but short on carrying it out.

Awkwardly, he clambered up onto the matted surface of the roots. They gave irregularly under him and their rough surfaces scraped his knees and hands. The natives gabbled, and he felt leathery hands urging him to stretch out and lie down on his back.

He did so. The root scored and poked the tender skin of his back. It was exquisitely uncomfortable.

"Now what – ?" he gasped. He turned his head to look at the natives and saw that green tendrils, growing rapidly from the root mass, were winding about and garlanding the arms and legs of Communicator and several other of the natives standing by. A sudden pricking at his left wrist made him look down.

Careen garlands were twining around his own wrists and ankles, sending wire-thin tendrils into his skin. In unconscious reflex of panic he tried to heave upward, but the green bonds held him fast.

" *Gabble-gabble-gabble. . .*" warbled Communicator, reassuringly.

With sudden alarm, Jerry realized that the green tendrils were growing right into the arms and legs of the natives as well. He was abruptly conscious of further prickings in his own arms and legs.

"What's going on –" he started to say, but found his tongue had gone unnaturally thick and unmanageable. A wave of dizziness swept over him as if a powerful general anesthetic was taking hold. The interior of the structure seemed to darken; and he felt as if he was swooping away toward its ceiling on the long swing of some monster pendulum . . .

It swung him on into darkness. And nightmare.

It was the same old nightmare, but more so. It was nightmare experienced awake instead of asleep; and the difference was that he had no doubt about the fact that he was experiencing what he was experiencing, nor any tucked-away certainty that waking would bring him out of it.

Once more he floated through a changing soup of uncertainty, himself a changing part of it. It was not painful, it was not even terrifying. But it was hideous – it was an affront to nature. He was not himself. He was a thing, a part of the whole – and he must reconcile himself to being so. He must accept it.

Reconcile himself to it – no! It was not possible for the unbending, solitary, individualistic part that was him to do so. But accept it – maybe.

Jerry set a jaw that was no longer a jaw and felt the determination in him to blast through, to comprehend this incomprehensible thing, become hard and undeniable as a sword-point of tungsten steel. He drove through –

And abruptly the soup fell into order. It slid into focus like a blurred scene before the gaze of a badly myopic man who finally gets his spectacles before his eyes. Suddenly, Jerry was aware that what he observed was a scene not just before his eyes, but before his total awareness. And it was not the interior of the structure where he lay on a bed of roots, but the whole planet.

It was a landscape of factories. Countless factories, interconnected, intersupplying, integrated. It lacked only that he find his own working place among them.

Now, said this scene. *This is the sane universe, the way it really is. Reconcile yourself to it.*

The hell I will!

It was the furious, unbending, solitary, individualistic part that was essentially *him*, speaking again. Not just speaking. Roaring – snarling its defiance, like a tiger on a hillside.

And the scene went – *pop*.

Jerry opened his eyes. He sat up. The green shoots around and in his wrists and ankles pulled pricklingly at him. But they were already dying and not able to hold him. He swung his legs over the edge of the mat of roots and stood down. Communicator and the others, who were standing there, backed fearfully away from him, gabbling.

He understood their gabbling no better than before, but now he could read the emotional overtones in it. And those overtones were now of horror and disgust, overlying a wild, atavistic panic and terror. He walked forward. They scuttled away before him, gabbling, and he walked through the nearest crack in the wall of the structure and out into the sunlight, toward the transceiver and the belt where he had dropped them.

"Monster!" screamed the transceiver tinnily, faithfully translating the gabbling of the Communicator, who was following a few steps behind like a small dog barking behind a larger. "Brute! Savage! Unclean . . ." It kept up a steady denunciation.

Jerry turned to face Communicator, and the native tensed for flight.

"You know what I'm waiting for," said Jerry, almost smiling, hearing the transceiver translate his words into gabbling – though it was not necessary. As he had said, Communicator knew what he was waiting for.

Communicator cursed a little longer in his own tongue, then went off into one of the structures, and returned with a handful of what looked like lengths of green vine. He dropped them on the ground before Jerry and backed away, cautiously, gabbling.

"Now will you go? And never come back! Never . . ."

"We'll see," said Jerry. He picked up the lengths of green vine and turned away up the path to the ship.

The natives he passed on his way out of the clearing huddled away from him and gabbled as he went.

When he stepped back into the clearing before the ship, he saw that most of the vegetation touching or close to the ship was already brown and dying. He went on into the ship, carefully avoiding the locked sick-bay door, and wound lengths of the green vine around the wrists of each of the men in restraints.

Then he sat down to await results. He had never been so tired in his life. The minute he touched the chair, his eyes started to close. He struggled to his feet and forced himself to pace the floor until the green vines, which had already sent hair-thin tendrils into the ulnar arteries of the arms around which they were wrapped, pumped certain inhibitory chemicals into the bloodstreams of the seven men.

When the men started to blink their eyes and look about sensibly, he went to work to unfasten the homemade straitjackets that had held them prisoner. When he had released the last one, he managed to get out his final message before collapsing.

"Take the ship up," croaked Jerry. "Then, let yourself into the sick bay and wrap a vine piece around the wrists of Milt, and Art, and Ben. Ship up first – then when you're safely in space, take care of them, first – then the sick bay. Do it the other way and you'll never see Earth again."

They crowded around him with questions. He waved them off, slumping into one of the abandoned bunks.

"Ship up –" he croaked. "Then release and fix the others. Ask me later. Later –"

. . . And that was all he remembered, then.

IV

At some indefinite time later, not quite sure whether he had woken by himself, or whether someone else had wakened him, Jerry swam back up to consciousness. He was vaguely aware that he had been sleeping a long time; and his body felt sane again, but weak as the body of a man after a long illness.

He blinked and saw the large face of Milt Johnson, partly obscured by a cup of something. Milt was seated in a chair by the side of the bunk Jerry lay in, and the Team captain was offering the cup of steaming black liquid to Jerry. Slowly, Jerry understood that this was coffee and he struggled up on one elbow to take the cup.

He drank from it slowly for a little while, while Milt watched and waited.

"Do you realize," said Milt at last, when Jerry finally put down the three-quarters empty cup on the nightstand by the bunk, "that what you did in locking me in the sick bay was mutiny?"

Jerry swallowed. Even his vocal cords seemed drained of strength and limp.

"You realize," he croaked, "what would have happened if I hadn't?"

"You took a chance. You followed a wild hunch –"

"No hunch," said Jerry. He cleared his throat. "Art found that growth on Wally's brain had quit growing before Wally killed himself. And I'd been getting along without tranquilizers – handling the nightmares better than I had with them."

"It could have been the growth in your own brain," said Milt, "taking over and running you – working better on you than it had on Wally."

"Working better – talk sense!" said Jerry, weakly, too pared down by the past two weeks to care whether school kept or not, in the matter of service courtesy to a superior. "The nightmares had broken Wally down to where we had to wrap him in a straitjacket. They hadn't even knocked me off my feet. If Wally's physiological processes had fought the alien invasion to a standstill, then I, you, Art, and Ben – all of us – had to be doing even better. Besides – I'd figured out what the aliens were after."

"What were they after?" Milt looked strangely at him.

"Curing us – of something we didn't have when we landed, but they thought we had."

"And what was that?"

"Insanity," said Jerry, grimly.

Milt's blond eyebrows went up. He opened his mouth as if to say something disbelieving then closed it again. When he did speak, it was quite calmly and humbly.

"They thought," he asked, "Communicator's people thought that we were insane, and they could cure us?"

Jerry laughed; not cheerfully, but grimly.

"You saw that jungle around us back there?" he asked. "That was a factory complex – an infinitely complex factory complex. You saw their village with those tangles of roots inside the big whitish shells? – that was a highly diversified laboratory."

Milt's blue eyes slowly widened, as Jerry watched. "You don't mean that – seriously?" said Milt, at last.

"That's right." Jerry drained the cup and set it aside. "Their technology is based on organic chemistry, the way ours is on the physical sciences. By our standards, they're chemical wizards. How'd you like to try changing the mind of an alien organism by managing to grow an extra part on to his brain – the way they tried to do to us humans? To them, it was the simplest way of convincing us."

Milt stared again. Finally, he shook his head.

"Why?" he said. "Why would they want to change our minds?"

"Because their philosophy, their picture of life and the universe around them grew out of a chemically oriented science," answered Jerry. "The result is, they see all life as part of a closed, intro-acting chemical circuit with no loose ends; with every living thing, intelligent or not, a part of the whole. Well, you saw it for yourself in your nightmare. That's the cosmos as they see it – and to them it's beautiful."

"But why did they want us to see it the way they did?"

"Out of sheer kindness," said Jerry and laughed barkingly. "According to their cosmology, there's no such thing as an alien. Therefore we weren't alien – just sick in the head. Poisoned by the lumps of metal like the ship and the translator we claimed were so important. And our clothes and everything else we had. The kind thing was to cure and rescue us."

"Now, wait a minute," said Milt. "They saw those things of ours *work* –"

"What's the fact they worked got to do with it? What you don't understand, Milt," said Jerry, lying back gratefully on the bunk, "is that Communicator's peoples' minds were closed. Not just unconvinced, not just refusing to see – but closed! Sealed, and welded shut from prehistoric beginnings right down to the present. The fact our translator worked meant nothing to them. According to their cosmology, it shouldn't work, so it didn't. Any stray phenomena tending to prove it did were simply the product of diseased minds."

Jerry paused to emphasize the statement and his eyes drifted shut. The next thing he knew Milt was shaking him.

". . . Wake up!" Milt was shouting at him. "You can dope off after you've explained. I'm not going to have any crew back in straitjackets again, just because you were too sleepy to warn me they'd revert!"

". . . Won't revert," said Jerry, thickly. He roused himself. "Those lengths of vine released chemicals into their bloodstreams to destroy what was left of the growths. I wouldn't leave until I got them from Communicator." Jerry struggled up on one elbow again. "And after a short walk in a human brain – mine

– he and his people couldn't get us out of sight and forgotten fast enough."

"Why?" Milt shook him again as Jerry's eyelids sagged. "Why should getting their minds hooked in with yours shake them up so?"

". . . Bust – bust their cosmology open. Quit shaking . . . I'm awake."

" *Why* did it bust them wide open?"

"Remember – how it was for you with the nightmares?" said Jerry. "The other way around? Think back, about when you slept. There you were, a lone atom of humanity, caught up in a nightmare like one piece of stew meat in a vat stewing all life together – just one single chemical bit with no independent existence, and no existence at all except as part of the whole. Remember?"

He saw Milt shiver slightly.

"It was like being swallowed up by a soft machine," said the Team captain in a small voice. "I remember."

"All right," said Jerry. "That's how it was for you in Communicator's cosmos. But remember something about that cosmos? It was warm, and safe. It was all-embracing, all-settling, like a great, big, soft, woolly comforter."

"It was too much like a woolly comforter," said Milt, shuddering. "It was unbearable."

"To you. Right," said Jerry. "But to Communicator, it was ideal. And if that was ideal, think what it was like when he had to step into a human mind – mine."

Milt stared at him.

"Why?" Milt asked.

"Because," said Jerry, "he found himself *alone* there!"

Milt's eyes widened.

"Think about it, Milt," said Jerry. "From the time we're born, we're individuals. From the moment we open our eyes on the world, inside we're alone in the universe. All the emotional and intellectual resources that Communicator draws from his identity with the stewing vat of his cosmos, each one of us has to dig up for and out of himself!"

Jerry stopped to give Milt a chance to say something. But Milt was evidently not in possession of something to say at the moment.

"That's why Communicator and the others couldn't take it, when they hooked into my human mind," Jerry went on. "And that's why, when they found out what we were like inside, they couldn't wait to get rid of us. So they gave me the vines and kicked us out. That's the whole story." He lay back on the bunk.

Milt cleared his throat. "All right," he said.

Jerry's heavy eyes closed. Then the other man's voice spoke, still close by his ear.

"But," said Milt, "I still think you took a chance, going down to butt heads with the natives that way. What if Communicator and the rest had been able to stand exposure to your mind. You'd locked me in and the other men were in restraint. Our whole team would have been part of that stewing vat."

"Not a chance," said Jerry.

"You can't be sure of that."

"Yes I can." Jerry heard his own voice sounding harshly beyond the darkness of his closed eyelids. "It wasn't just that I knew my cosmological view was too tough for them. It was the fact that their minds were closed – in the vat they had no freedom to change and adapt themselves to anything new."

"What's that got to do with it?" demanded the voice of Milt.

"Everything," said Jerry. "Their point of view only made us more uncomfortable – but our point of view, being individually adaptable, and open, threatened to destroy the very laws of existence as they saw them. An open mind can always stand a closed one, if it has to – by making room for it in the general picture. But a closed mind can't stand it near an open one without risking immediate and complete destruction in its own terms. In a closed mind, there's no more room."

He stopped speaking and slowly exhaled a weary breath.

"Now," he said, without opening his eyes, "will you finally get out of here and let me sleep?"

For a long second more, there was silence. Then, he heard a chair scrape softly, and the muted steps of Milt tiptoeing away.

With another sigh, at last Jerry relaxed and let consciousness slip from him.

He slept.

– as sleep the boar upon the plain, the hawk upon the crag, and the tiger on the hill . . .

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